



# 2023 Washington transfer associate degree effectiveness update

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### Executive Summary

Every two years, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) submits a report on **transfer degree effectiveness** to the state legislature. **The biennial report includes information on credit accumulation, credit transfer, enrollment, graduation, and time to degree of transfer students; how those outcomes compare to those of direct entry students; and the extent to which outcomes differ by students' demographic and academic characteristics.** Below, we use our analyses of transfer outcomes data to summarize the state of transfer in Washington through the 2021-22 academic year, including strengths and areas for improvement. The summary incorporates new data to build on and extend the top-line insights on the state of transfer included in the last report, published in 2021.

***Enrollment in transfer degrees grew relative to enrollment in professional and technical programs at CTCs, though enrollment rates varied by race and ethnicity.***

Although the total number of transfer degrees awarded at community and technical colleges (CTCs) declined in recent years — in line with enrollment declines at community colleges across the state — an increasing share of students at CTCs enrolled in transfer degree programs: 56 percent of credential-seeking students at CTCs were enrolled in transfer degrees in fall 2021,<sup>1</sup> up from 48 percent in fall 2019 (Figure 1, Page 7).<sup>2</sup>

The share of credential-seeking students enrolled in transfer degrees increased across all racial and ethnic groups between fall 2019 and fall 2021, but enrollment rates varied by race and ethnicity (Figure 1, Page 7). Among students enrolled in a CTC, two-thirds of credential-seeking Asian students participated in a transfer degree program during fall 2021, more than any other racial and ethnic group (Figure 1, Page 7).<sup>3</sup> American Indian/Alaska Native as well as Pacific Islander students, on the other hand, were the least likely to enroll in a transfer degree program, at roughly half of the students in each group. Transfer degree attainment also varied by race and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> While more than half of postsecondary credentials earned by Asian CTC students were transfer degrees, slightly more than one-third of awards earned by Black CTC students were transfer degrees (Figure 2, Page 8).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SBCTC Enrollment Data Dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/enrollment-data-dashboard>.

<sup>2</sup> Gail Wootan, "2021 Washington transfer associate degree effectiveness update," *Washington Student Achievement Council*, February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> SBCTC Enrollment Data Dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/enrollment-data-dashboard>.

<sup>4</sup> SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>.

<sup>5</sup> Between 2017-18 and 2021-22, Washington community and technical colleges completed the transition to the ctLink data system. In the new system, an increasing share of students have selected multiple racial or ethnic categories to represent their identities, which has contributed to a rise in reported figures for multiracial students relative to individual race categories.

***Nursing continued to grow in popularity,<sup>6</sup> though Business, Pre-Nursing, and the Associate of Science-Transfer Track 2 (AS-T 2) remained popular major-specific transfer degrees.***

Major-specific transfer degrees are specialized transfer degrees intended to provide on-ramps into specific bachelor's degree majors. As was the case in the 2019-20 academic year, the four most awarded major-specific transfer degrees in the 2021-22 academic year were Business (32 percent of all MRPs), Nursing (20 percent), Pre-Nursing (13 percent), and AS-T 2 (12 percent) (Figure 6, Page 12).<sup>7</sup> Among students who received major-specific transfer degrees, the share of students who received degrees in Business and AS-T 2 continued to decline,<sup>8</sup> while the share of students who received a Nursing degree steadily increased, up from 6 percent in 2017-18 (Figure 6, Page 12).

***CTC students who enrolled in a transfer degree were more likely to persist past their first year than other credential-seeking students, and four-year graduates who transferred with a degree outperformed their direct entry peers.***

Among CTC students, fall-to-fall retention rates between 2020 and 2021 were higher for those enrolled in a transfer degree program than those enrolled in a professional or technical program (Figure 8, Page 15).<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, bachelor's degree earners with a transfer degree were more successful, on average, than their direct entry peers, both in terms of institutional GPA and graduation rates. While we don't have data on graduation rates for students with a transfer degree specifically, transfer students overall were more likely to leave public four-year institutions with a degree than their direct entry peers. The bachelor's completion rate among students who transferred in 2016-17 (76 percent) was higher than the six-year completion rate among students who entered directly from high school two years earlier (68 percent) (Figure 11, Page 18).<sup>10</sup>

***Washington's transfer degrees have become an increasingly common pathway for transfer students who go on to earn a bachelor's degree at a public institution.***

Washington's transfer degrees are associate degrees specifically aimed at preparing students for entry into a four-year college or university. By allowing students to enter a four-year institution having completed most of their lower division general education requirements, these degrees are intended to

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<sup>6</sup> The introduction of the ADN degree likely complicates reporting on Nursing. The ADN is a competitive entry program, unlike the associate degree in Pre-Nursing. ADN students likely would have been in an LPN or RN professional or technical program before the introduction of the ADN. As a result, students in the ADN are now reported under transfer degrees when they would have previously been in professional or technical programs.

<sup>7</sup> SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>.

<sup>8</sup> The decline in AS-T Track 2 degrees is likely due in part to the creation of the CS DTA/MRP, which has steered students away from the traditional computer science pathway that is embedded in the AS-T Track 2 to this new pathway, particularly for students who want to earn a BA in computer science.

<sup>9</sup> SBCTC First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://tableaudev.sbctc.edu/#/site/SBCTCTest/views/First-TimeEnteringStudentOutcomes/IntroductionMenu?iid=1>.

<sup>10</sup> PCHEES Dashboard - Graduation/Continuation, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://data.wa.gov/Education/PCHEES-Dashboard-Graduation-Continuation/98ng-jhtx>.

create an efficient and smooth transition for students transferring from a community and technical college (CTC).

More than half of students who graduated from a public institution with a bachelor's degree in 2020-21 were transfer students, and nearly one-third entered with a CTC transfer degree, compared to less than one quarter in the 2018-19 academic year, an increase of almost 40 percent.<sup>11</sup> This means that over 60 percent of students who transferred and earned a bachelor's degree from a public institution earned a transfer degree along the way.

***While transfer degrees — including major-specific transfer degrees — were awarded to students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds at higher rates, the post-transfer outcomes of these students were below the outcomes of their peers.***

While the overall number of transfer degrees awarded declined between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 academic years – likely related to national community college enrollment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic – the number awarded to Black and multiracial students during this same period increased (Figure 4, Page 10). Additionally, among students who received a transfer degree, the share of Black and Pacific Islander students who received major-specific transfer degrees increased between 2019-20<sup>12</sup> and 2021-22,<sup>13</sup> from 24 to 35 percent for Black students and 16 to 27 percent for Pacific Islander students (Figure 5, Page 11).

However, even though historically marginalized student groups received transfer degrees and transferred into four-year institutions at higher rates than in previous years, graduation rates have yet to rise in response. Among students who transferred into a public four-year institution during the 2016-17 academic year, Hispanic, Black, and multiracial students had the lowest bachelor's completion rates in 2020-21, at 70, 71, and 72 percent respectively, compared to an average of 76 percent (Figure 11, Page 18).<sup>14</sup>

***Bachelor's degree earners who transferred into a public institution with a degree typically graduated with more credits than those who entered directly from high school, though that was not always the case.***

The ability to count previously earned credits toward degree requirements at the new institution affects the cumulative number of attempted and earned credits, as well as time to degree completion and the cost of a degree. In 2020-21, the median graduate who entered directly into a public institution from

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<sup>11</sup> Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

<sup>12</sup> Gail Wootan, "2021 Washington transfer associate degree effectiveness update," *Washington Student Achievement Council*, February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>.

<sup>14</sup> PCHEES Dashboard - Graduation/Continuation, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://data.wa.gov/Education/PCHEES-Dashboard-Graduation-Continuation/98ng-jhtx>.

high school (“direct entry”) earned 186 credits, compared to 194 credits earned by the median graduate who transferred in with a degree (Figure 15, Page 22).<sup>15</sup>

Transfer pathways, which vary by major and degree type, also affect cumulative credits. During the 2020-21 academic year, the median graduate with a Business bachelor’s degree who entered with a major-specific transfer degree earned fewer credits than the median direct-entry graduate with a Business bachelor’s degree (Figure 23, Page 31).<sup>16</sup> However, the median bachelor’s degree earner with an Engineering (Figure 24, Page 32) or AS-T 2 **related major** (Figure 21, Page 29) who had transferred earned more credits than their direct entry peers, regardless of whether or not those who transferred had earned a major-specific associate degree.

### Background

Washington’s institutions have many strategies to support credential completion through transfer, such as reverse credit transfer and transfer advising programs. Although these strategies are integral to Washington’s transfer policy landscape, this report focuses on the state’s most prevalent strategy – the statewide transfer associate degree.

#### *Washington’s transfer degrees support a smooth transfer process.*

In 1971, Washington developed its first statewide transfer degree, the Direct Transfer Agreement (DTA) associate degree, to create an alternate accessible pathway to a bachelor’s degree. Students with a DTA from a CTC not only earn a credential, but they generally meet lower division general education bachelor’s degree requirements. And, if accepted, they are admitted as juniors to four-year institutions that sign on to the agreement. Over the ensuing years, state transfer partners developed major-specific transfer degrees to help students earn credits for certain bachelor’s degree majors. As of 2021, CTC students have 12 transfer degrees to choose from, and 11 of those degrees are major-specific in programs such as Business or Computer Science. See [wsac.wa.gov/transfers](https://wsac.wa.gov/transfers) for a list of current transfer degrees. This report analyzes the effectiveness of some of these degrees. To provide context, it first examines which students engage in the transfer degree pathway with a focus on race and ethnicity.

Even though Washington does not currently track cohorts of transfer degree students from the time they start at a CTC to the time they earn their bachelor’s degree, there are still some measurable stops on the transfer degree pathway. They include data about the following students:

- CTC students who are enrolled in a transfer degree program
- CTC students who earn transfer degrees
- Transfer degree earners who transfer to a four-year institution
- Transfer degree earners who earn a bachelor’s degree<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2017-18 to 2020-21 from ERDC.

<sup>16</sup> Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

<sup>17</sup> This includes transfer degree earners who earned an applied baccalaureate (BAS) at a CTC.

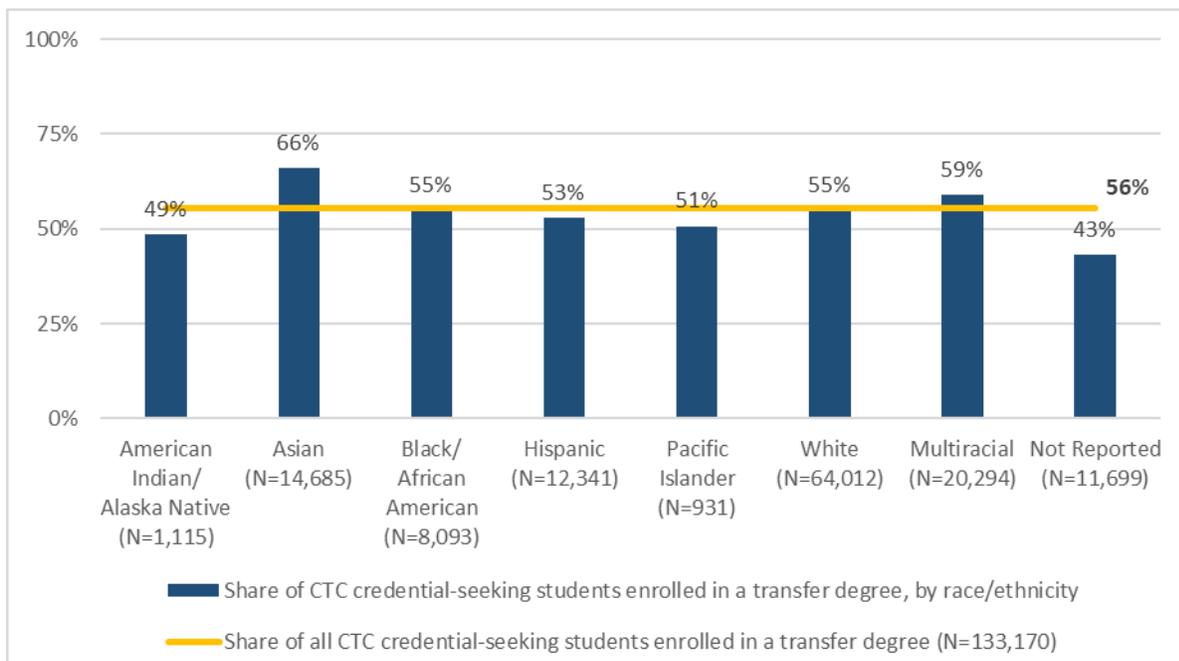
## General trends in transfer degrees

This section presents the following analyses of **transfer degree enrollment and attainment**, some of which are based on data not included in previous reports:

- The share of CTC postsecondary credential-seeking students enrolled in a transfer degree program, by race and ethnicity<sup>18</sup>
- The share of CTC postsecondary credentials awarded that were transfer degrees, by race and ethnicity
- The number of students who earned a transfer and major-specific transfer degree over time
- The percentage change in the number of students who earned a transfer degree and non-transfer postsecondary award over time, by race and ethnicity
- The share of transfer degrees earned that were major-specific, by race and ethnicity
- The share of major-specific degrees by major area over time
- The percentage breakdown of major-specific transfer degrees earned by racial and ethnic subgroups

### Which CTC students were enrolled in a transfer degree program?

**Figure 1. More than half of all CTC postsecondary credential-seeking students were enrolled in a transfer degree program in fall 2021.**



Source: SBCTC Enrollment Data Dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/enrollment-data-dashboard>. Note: data source includes 144 duplicated headcounts. Students who intended to complete

<sup>18</sup> Postsecondary credential-seeking students include CTC students enrolled in transfer degrees and students enrolled in professional-technical certificates, apprenticeships, associate degrees, and bachelor’s degrees. The group also includes high school students enrolled in these credentials through Running Start.

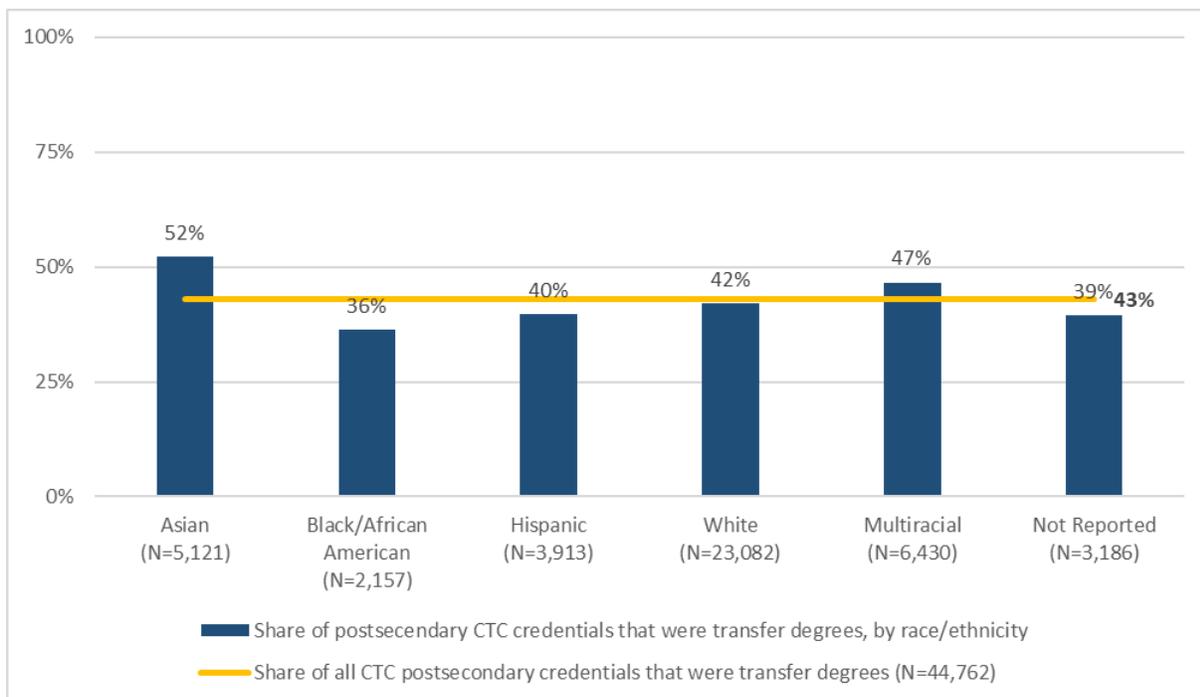
an applied baccalaureate (BAS) are included as CTC credential-seeking students but not as students enrolled in a transfer degree.

In fall 2021, 56 percent of CTC postsecondary credential-seeking students were enrolled in a transfer degree program, up from 48 percent in fall 2019.<sup>19</sup> This means that a larger share of CTC students are seeking credentials that put them on a path towards ultimately earning a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution.<sup>20</sup>

When looking at transfer degree enrollment of CTC credential-seeking students by race and ethnicity, students who identified as Asian enrolled in transfer degrees at the highest rate (66 percent). For students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, rates of enrollment in transfer degrees ranged from 49 to 59 percent. Figure 1 shows the share of postsecondary credential-seeking students enrolled in transfer degrees by race and ethnicity.

### Which CTC graduates earned transfer degrees?

**Figure 2. In 2021-22, more than half of postsecondary credentials earned by Asian CTC students were transfer degrees, while slightly more than one-third of awards earned by Black CTC students were transfer degrees.**



<sup>19</sup> SBCTC Enrollment Data Dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/enrollment-data-dashboard>.

<sup>20</sup> Because students who intended to complete an applied baccalaureate (BAS) are included in Figure 1 as CTC credential-seeking students but not as students enrolled in a transfer degree, the share of students enrolled in a transfer degree does not capture all CTC students who intended to complete a bachelor's degree.

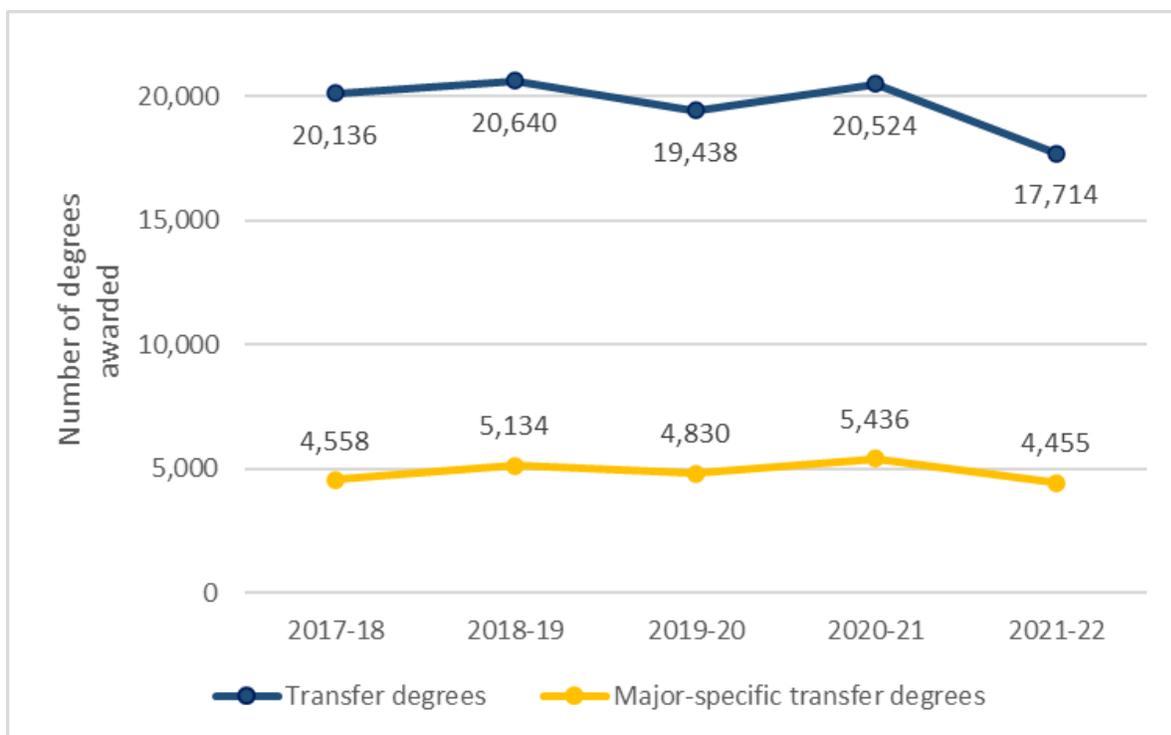
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Source: SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>. Note: We define applied baccalaureate degrees as non-transfer postsecondary awards. They are included above as CTC postsecondary credentials but not as transfer degrees. Postsecondary credential data for Native American/Alaska Native as well as Pacific Islander students are not included due to data suppression in the source data.

More than 40 percent of postsecondary credentials earned by CTC students in the 2021-22 academic year were transfer degrees. Figure 2 displays the share of CTC postsecondary credentials awarded that were transfer degrees by race and ethnicity.

### How popular are transfer degrees?

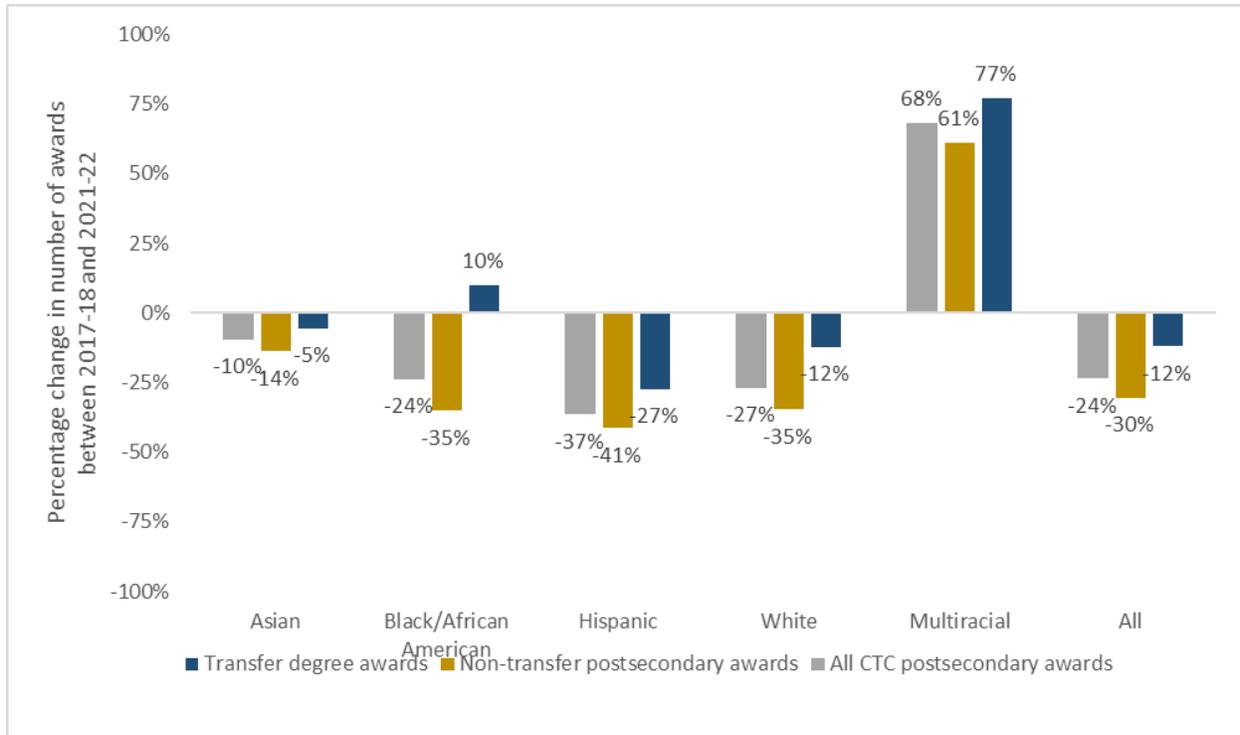
**Figure 3. Both the total number of transfer degrees and major-specific transfer degrees dropped between the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years, likely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**



Source: SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>. Note: These award counts do not include applied baccalaureate awards.

The total number of transfer degrees awarded at CTCs declined in the most recent academic year, in line with enrollment declines at community colleges across the state and country. During the 2021-22 academic year, 17,714 transfer degrees and 4,455 major-specific transfer degrees were awarded at CTCs, a 14 percent and 18 percent decline from the previous year.

**Figure 4. While the total number of CTC postsecondary awards earned by Black students declined between 2017-18 and 2021-22, the number of transfer degrees earned by Black students increased during the same time period.**



Source: SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>. Note: Transfer degree awards include AS-T and DTA awards. Non-transfer postsecondary awards include applied baccalaureate, apprenticeships, long certificates, short certificates, professional and technical associate degrees, and non-DTA transfer associate degrees. Postsecondary award data for Native American/Alaska Native as well as Pacific Islander students are not included due to data suppression in the source data.

Figure 4 shows how changes in the number of CTC transfer degrees awarded over time relate to changes in the number of non-transfer awards and how these changes vary by race and ethnicity.

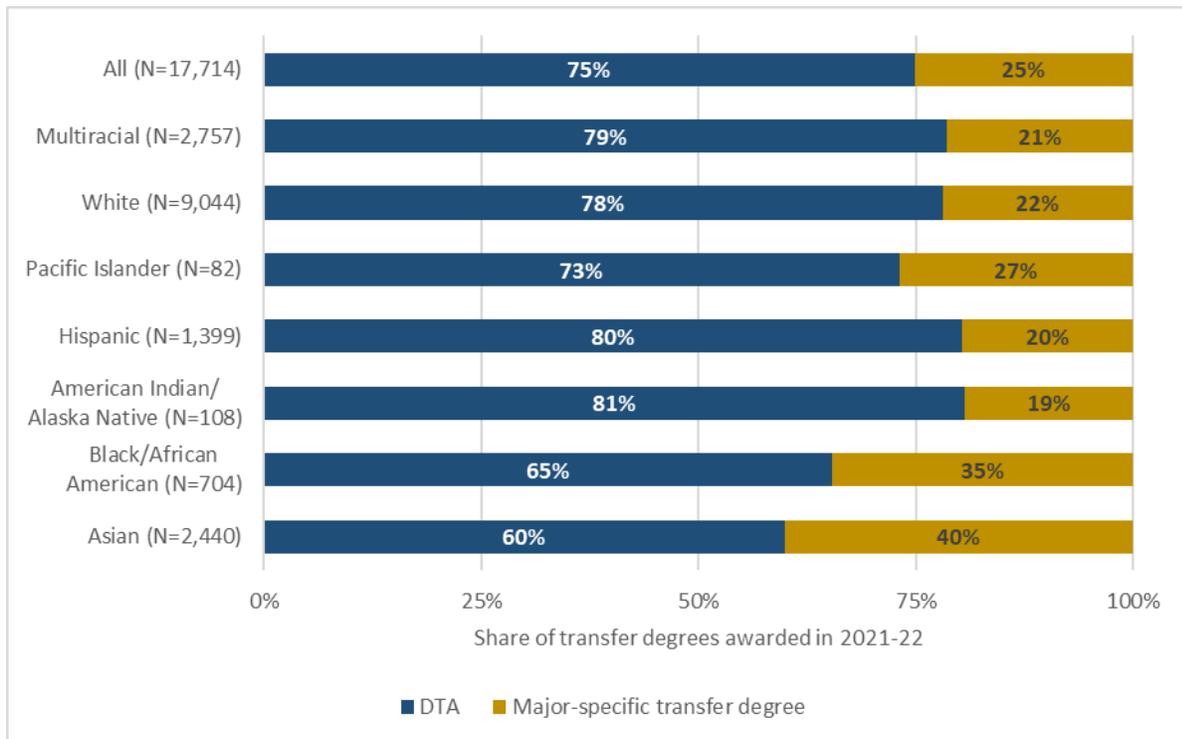
While there was a 24 percent decline in postsecondary awards at CTCs between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 academic years, there was a much greater decline among non-transfer postsecondary awards (30 percent) than among transfer degrees (12 percent). Similar trends were observed within most student subgroups, in which the decline in the number of transfer degrees was smaller than the decline in the total number of non-transfer postsecondary awards. However, there were two exceptions. While Black students also experienced a decline in the number of non-transfer postsecondary awards (35 percent), they experienced a 10 percent increase in the number of transfer degree awards over the same period. Additionally, multiracial students experienced large increases in the number of CTC postsecondary

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awards (68 percent), non-transfer degree awards (61 percent), and transfer degree awards (77 percent).<sup>21</sup>

*One in four transfer degrees awarded at CTCs was a major-specific degree.*

**Figure 5. During the 2021-22 academic year, 40 percent of transfer degrees earned by Asian students and 35 percent of transfer degrees earned by Black students were major-specific degrees, compared to 25 percent of transfer degrees earned by CTC students overall.**



Source: SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) awards are not included.

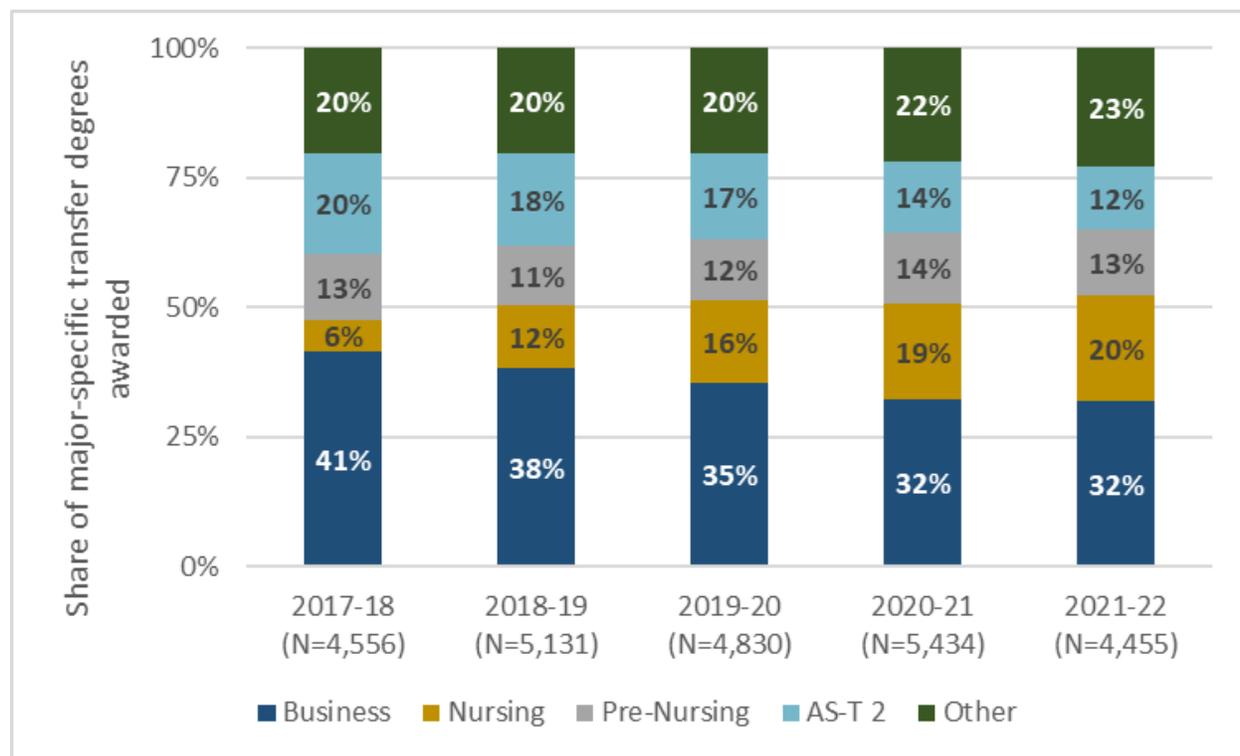
During the 2021-22 academic year, a quarter of transfer degrees awarded to CTC students were major-specific transfer degrees.<sup>22</sup> Figure 5 shows how this varied by race and ethnicity. Of students who earned transfer degrees, Asian and Black students were most likely to earn major-specific degrees: 40 percent of transfer degrees earned by Asian students and 35 percent of transfer degrees earned by Black students were major-specific.

<sup>21</sup> Between 2017-18 and 2021-22, Washington Community and Technical Colleges completed the transition to the ctLink data system. In the new system, an increasing share of students have selected multiple racial or ethnic categories to represent their identities, which has contributed to a rise in reported figures for 2+ Races relative to individual race categories.

<sup>22</sup> SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>.

Nursing continued to grow in popularity, though Business, Pre-Nursing, and the AS-T 2 also remained popular major-specific transfer degrees.

**Figure 6. The share of major-specific degrees awarded in Nursing has more than tripled in recent years, from 6 percent in the 2017-18 academic year to 20 percent in the 2021-22 academic year.**



Source: SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) awards are not included.

Figure 6 shows the share of CTC students who received awards in various major-specific degrees during the 2021-22 academic year. As was the case in the 2019-20 academic year, the four most awarded major-specific transfer degrees during the 2021-22 academic year were Business, Nursing, Pre-Nursing, and AS-T 2.

Though Business and AS-T 2 remain popular major-specific degrees,<sup>23</sup> the share of students who received degrees in these major areas relative to other major areas has declined since 2017-18.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The AS-T 2 transfer degree prepares students for bachelor's degrees in engineering, computer science, physics, and atmospheric sciences.

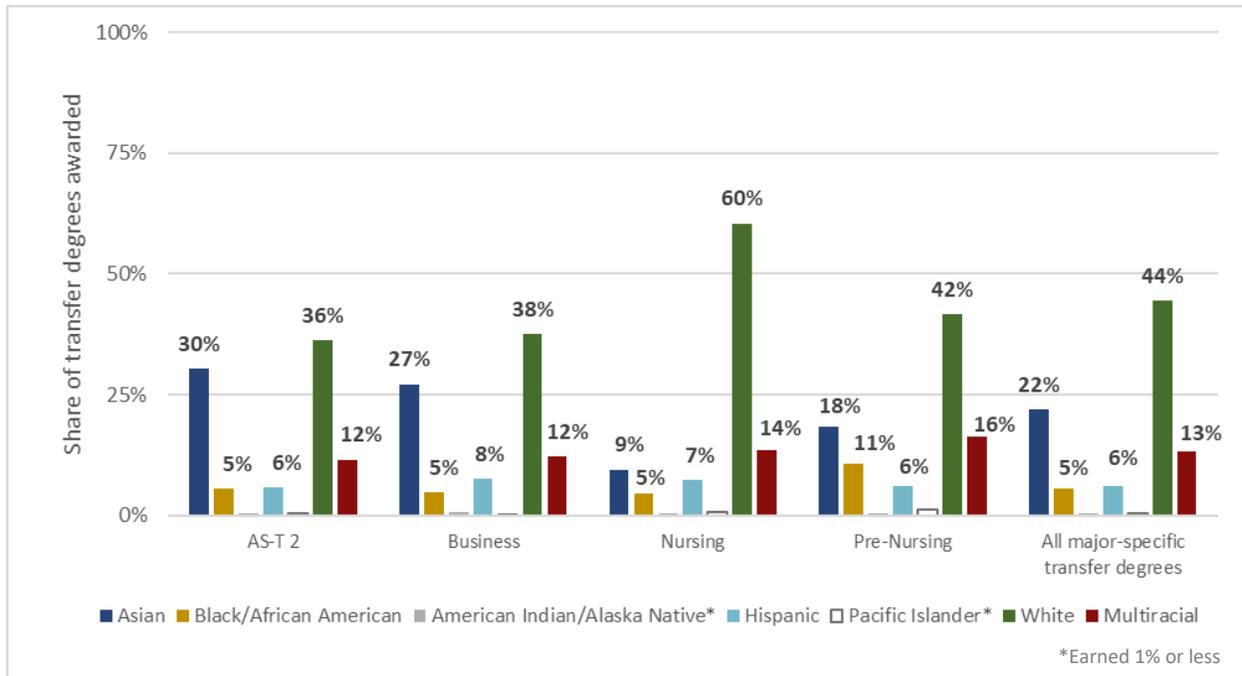
<sup>24</sup> The decline in AS-T Track 2 degrees is likely due in part to the creation of the CS DTA/MRP, which has steered students away from the traditional computer science pathway that is embedded in the AS-T Track 2 to this new pathway, particularly for students who want to earn a BA in computer science.

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Meanwhile, the share of students who received a Nursing degree has steadily increased, up from 6 percent of transfer degrees awarded during the 2017-18 academic year to 20 percent of transfer degrees awarded in the 2021-22 academic year.<sup>25</sup>

### *Racial inequities in Nursing transfer degree awards persisted through 2021-22*

**Figure 7. While 60 percent of Nursing transfer degrees in 2021-22 were awarded to White students and 5 percent were awarded to Black students, 42 percent of Pre-Nursing degrees were awarded to White students and 11 percent were awarded to Black students.**



Source: SBCTC Credentials Awarded dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/data-public/credentials-awarded-dashboard>. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) awards are not included.

Figure 7 shows the racial breakdown within each of the most popular transfer degrees awarded. As described in detail in the previous report, racial inequities persisted in terms of the types of Nursing transfer degrees awarded: while White students received 44 percent of major-specific degrees overall, they received 60 percent of Nursing degrees.

Compared to a pre-Nursing degree, the Nursing degree yields a number of future benefits, including eligibility to test for a Registered Nursing (RN) license and preparation for a one-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program at a four-year institution. Students with a Pre-Nursing degree, on the other

<sup>25</sup> The introduction of the ADN degree likely complicates reporting on Nursing. ADNs are competitive entry, unlike the Assoc in Pre-Nursing. ADN students likely would have been in an LPN or RN prof-tech program before introduction of the ADN, which are competitive entry programs requiring prerequisites -- unlike the Assoc in Pre-Nursing. As a result, students in the ADN are now reported under transfer degrees when they would have previously been in prof-tech programs.

hand, are not eligible to test for any state-required health certifications, so they cannot work as a Nurse, and they are less likely to transfer to earn a BSN.

### The effectiveness of transfer degrees

There are a number of ways to measure transfer degree effectiveness. This section presents the following analyses to capture the extent to which transfer degrees awarded in Washington were effective, some of which are based on data not included in previous reports:

- The retention, completion, and transfer rates of first-time CTC students enrolled in a transfer program compared to other first-time CTC credential-seeking students<sup>26</sup>
- The four-year bachelor's graduation rate of transfer students and six-year bachelor's graduation rate of direct entry students at public four-year institutions, by race and ethnicity
- The share of bachelor's degree earners who entered with a transfer degree, by race and ethnicity, age, and receipt of the Washington College Grant (WCG)<sup>27</sup>
- Comparison of institutional GPA between the median transfer student graduate and the median graduate who entered directly from high school<sup>28</sup>
- Comparison of the number of credits earned between the median transfer student graduate and the median graduate who entered directly from high school, by race and ethnicity, age, and WCG status<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "First-time CTC students" includes five cohorts of first-time entering students at CTC institutions, including: first-time college students, first-time students at a particular institution, first-time Running Start participants, students participating in College in the High School (CHS), and students enrolled in alternative high schools.

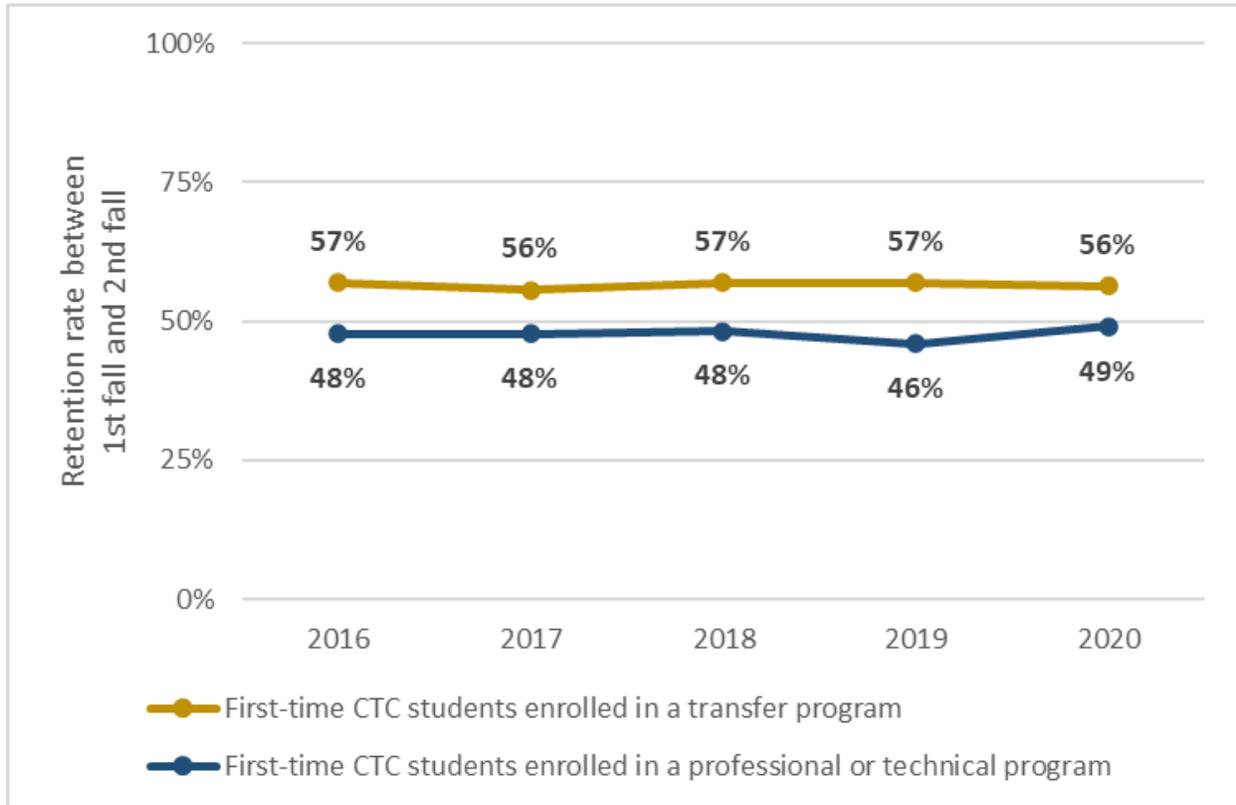
<sup>27</sup> Graduates who participated in Running Start may be duplicated in this dataset.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

*First-time CTC students enrolled in transfer degrees were more likely to persist past their first year than other first-time credential-seeking students.*

**Figure 8. Between 2016 and 2020, first-time students enrolled in CTC transfer degree programs consistently showed higher rates of retention between their first and second years than first-time students enrolled in professional or technical programs.**



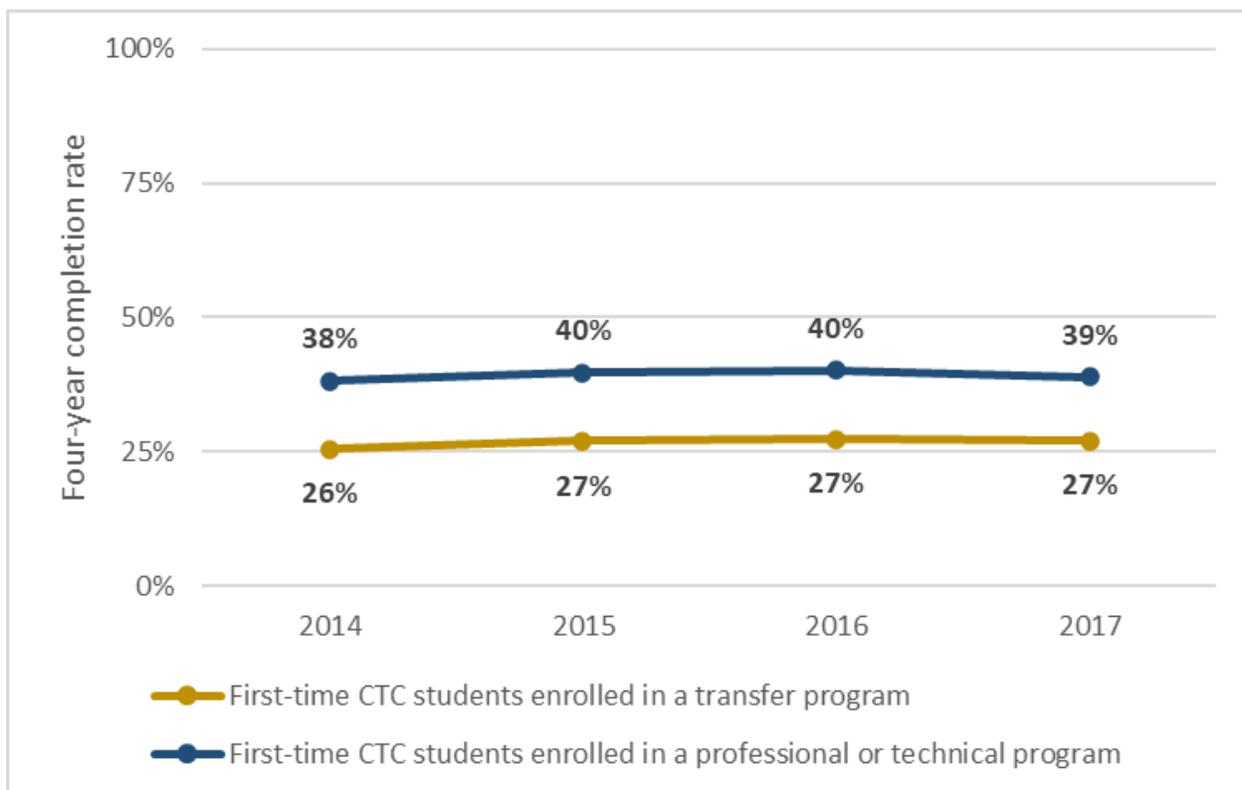
Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of first-time entering CTC students between 2016 and 2020 from SBCTC’s First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard. Note: Students enrolled in CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) programs are not included. Students who participated in Running Start are included.

Figure 8 shows the first-to-second year retention rate for first-time students enrolled in transfer degrees and other first-time CTC credential-seeking students. Fifty-six percent of first-time students who enrolled in a transfer degree program during the fall of 2019 remained enrolled the following fall, while less than half of first-time students who enrolled in a professional or technical program in the fall of 2019 remained enrolled one year later.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> SBCTC First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://tableaudev.sbctc.edu/#/site/SBCTCTest/views/First-TimeEnteringStudentOutcomes/IntroductionMenu?iid=1>.

*Fewer than one-third of first-time students enrolled in a transfer degree program completed one.*

**Figure 9.** Among first-time students who enrolled in a CTC between 2014 and 2017, four in ten students in professional or technical programs completed their program compared to less than thirty percent of students enrolled in a transfer degree program.



Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of first-time entering CTC students between 2014 and 2017 from SBCTC’s First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard. Note: Students enrolled in CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) programs are not included.

While first-time students who enrolled in a transfer degree program were more likely than other first-time credential-seeking students to stay enrolled past their first year, they were less likely to complete their degree within four years.<sup>31</sup>

As shown in Figure 9, despite rising completion rates for both groups, 27 percent of first-time students who entered a transfer degree program in 2017 graduated within four years, while 39 percent of first-time students who entered a professional or technical program in 2017 graduated within four years.<sup>32</sup> The transfer-out rates shown in Figure 10 below provide important context for this discrepancy in

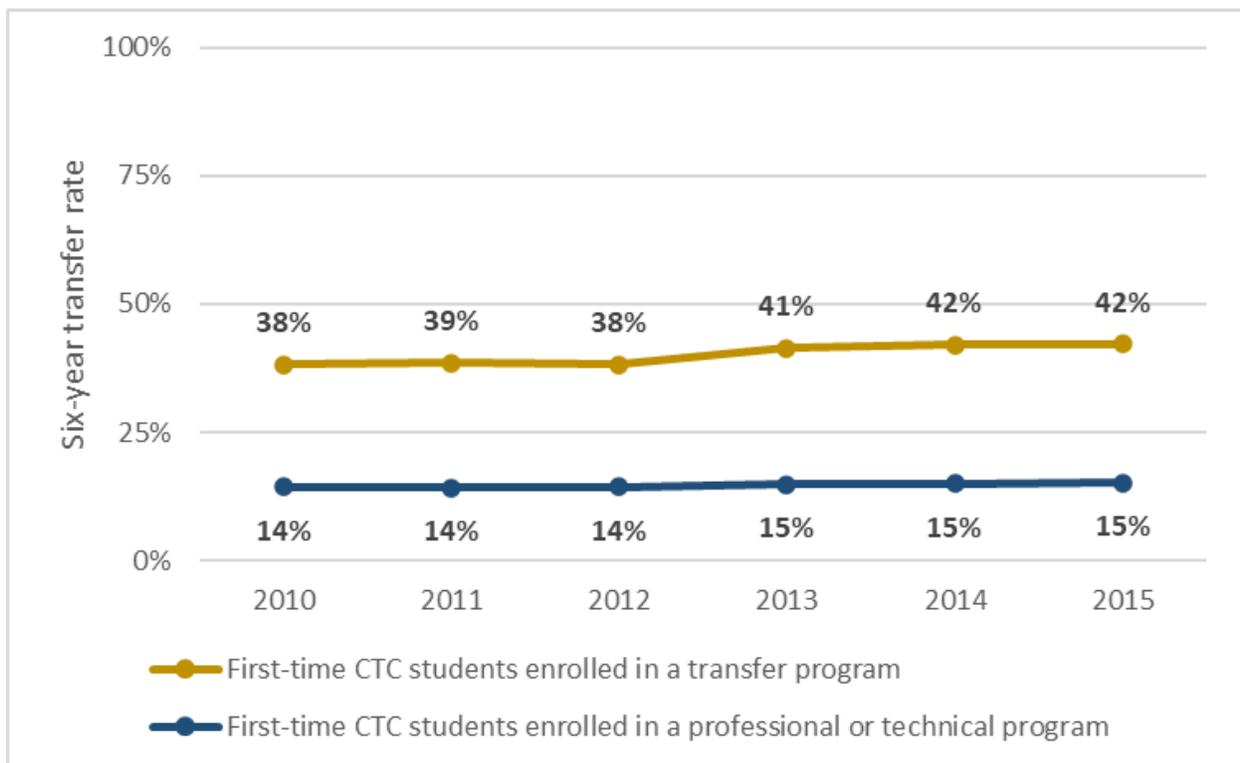
<sup>31</sup> SBCTC First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://tableaudev.sbctc.edu/#/site/SBCTCTest/views/First-TimeEnteringStudentOutcomes/IntroductionMenu?iid=1>.

<sup>32</sup> Part of this discrepancy could be explained by the fact that professional or technical programs include short-term certificates, which have a significantly shorter time to completion than 90-credit associate degrees.

completion rates and suggest that at least some first-time students who enroll in transfer degree programs transfer without first completing a transfer degree.

*Though transfer rates among first-time students enrolled in a CTC program increased, fewer than half of students who entered a transfer degree program between 2010 and 2015 transferred.*

**Figure 10. Among students who first enrolled in a CTC program in 2015, 42 percent of students who enrolled in a transfer degree went on to transfer to a four-year institution within six years, compared to only 15 percent of students who enrolled in a professional or technical program.**



Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of first-time entering CTC students between 2010 and 2015 from SBCTC's First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard. Note: Students enrolled in CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) programs are not included.

Figure 10 shows the six-year transfer-out rate for first-time students enrolled in transfer degree programs compared to other first-time CTC credential-seeking students. Students enrolled in transfer degree programs between 2010 and 2015 were almost three times as likely as those who enrolled in professional or technical programs to transfer within six years of enrolling. Still, less than half of students who intended to transfer did so after six years.

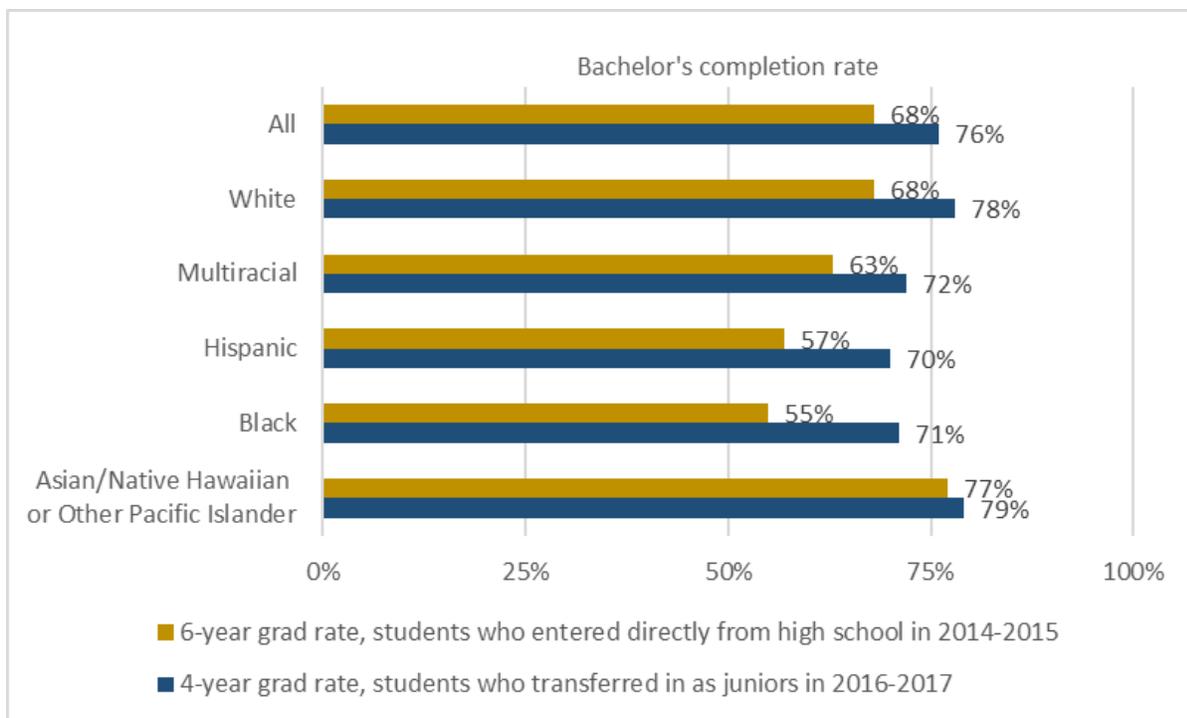
The transfer-out rate includes students who transferred with a degree and those who transferred prior to earning one, which may be one reason why the completion rates of students enrolled in a transfer degree program are lower than those of students enrolled in a professional or technical program.

Because students enrolled in a transfer degree were more likely to transfer, including transferring without completing a degree, this may explain why students enrolled in a transfer degree program were retained at higher rates but completed a CTC degree at lower rates than students enrolled in a professional or technical program.

### Did students who earned transfer degrees and transferred to a four-year institution graduate with a bachelor's degree at similar rates as their peers?

Beyond understanding the trajectory of CTC students who earn transfer degrees, it is also important to consider how these students perform relative to other students at four-year colleges and universities. Unfortunately, Washington's publicly available data does not include information on completion for transfer degree recipients specifically. However, data on bachelor's degree completion rates for transfer students more broadly offers some insight into this question.

**Figure 11. Across all racial and ethnic groups, students who transferred into a public four-year institution during the 2016-17 academic year had higher four-year graduation rates than the six-year graduation rates of those who entered directly from high school two years earlier.**



Source: PCHEES Dashboard - Graduation/Continuation, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://data.wa.gov/Education/PCHEES-Dashboard-Graduation-Continuation/98ng-jhtx>. Note: The source data did not include completion rates for Native American/Alaska Native students or students enrolled in CTC applied baccalaureate programs.

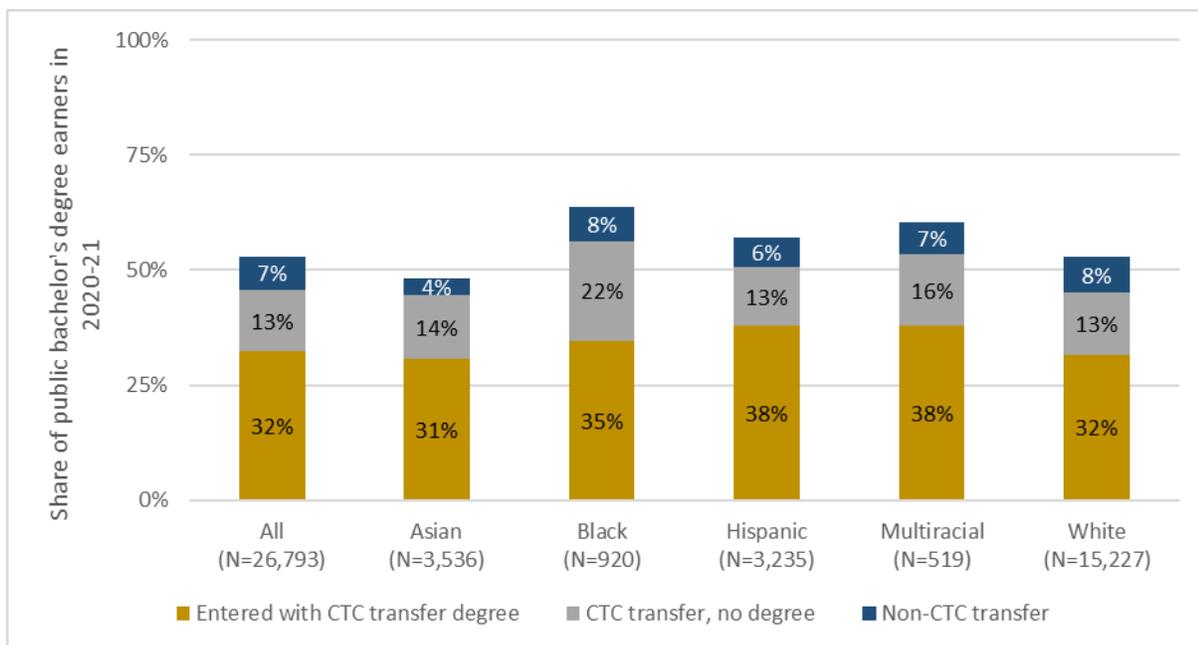
During the 2020-21 academic year, more than three-quarters of transfer students completed a bachelor's degree within four years, compared to only 68 percent of students who entered a public four-

year institution directly from high school.<sup>33</sup> Higher completion rates for transfer students relative to direct entry students were consistent across all racial and ethnic groups.<sup>34</sup> However, Black and Hispanic students demonstrated noticeably higher completion rates among transfer students relative to their direct entry peers. Black and Hispanic students who transferred into a four-year institution during the 2016-17 academic year had completion rates that were 13 and 16 percentage points higher than their peers who entered directly from high school two years prior.

*Transfer degrees have become an increasingly common pathway for transfer students who go on to earn a bachelor's degree.*

More than half of students who graduated from a public institution with a bachelor's degree in 2020-21 were transfer students, and nearly one-third entered with a CTC transfer degree, compared to less than one quarter in the 2018-19 academic year.<sup>35</sup> This means that over 60 percent of students who transferred and earned a bachelor's degree earned a transfer degree along the way.

**Figure 12. During the 2020-21 academic year, nearly one-third of bachelor's degree earners at public institutions entered with a transfer degree.**



Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

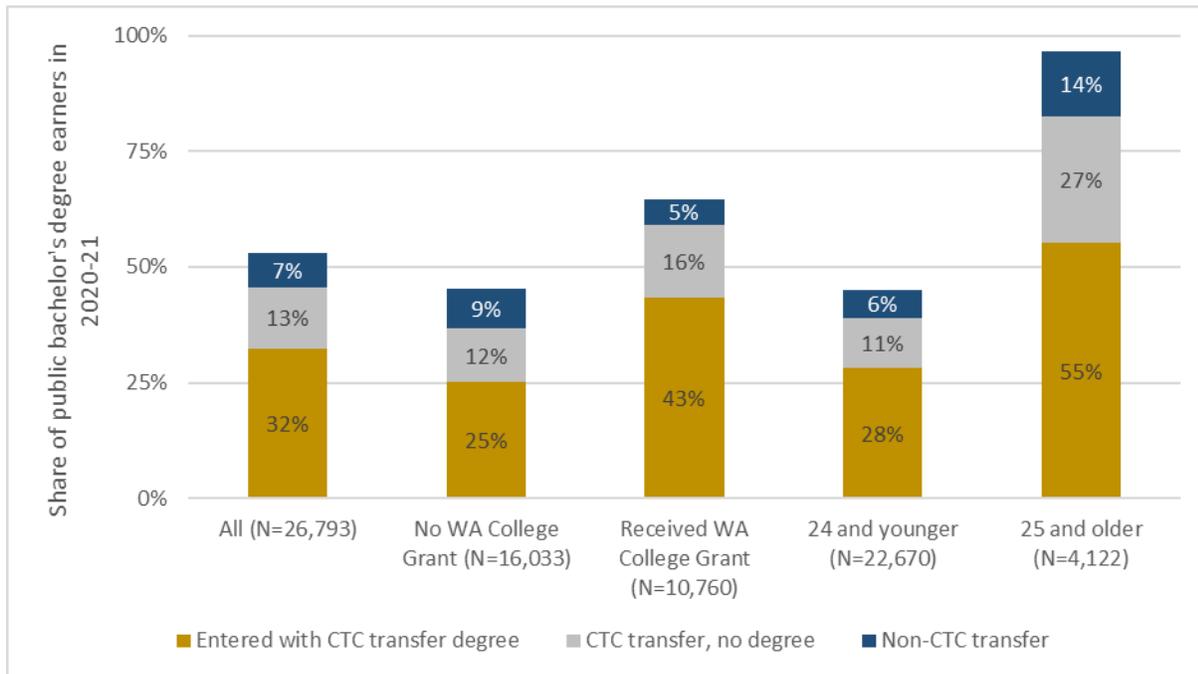
<sup>33</sup> PCHEES Dashboard - Graduation/Continuation, accessed 5/15/23 at <https://data.wa.gov/Education/PCHEES-Dashboard-Graduation-Continuation/98ng-jhtx>.

<sup>34</sup> Due to data limitations, this analysis is between freshman status direct entry students and junior status transfer students. Higher completion rates for transfer students may be partly driven by transfer students having completed more credits and therefore being closer to degree completion than direct entry students.

<sup>35</sup> Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

As shown in Figure 12, nearly two-thirds of Black bachelor’s degree earners transferred in, more than any other group, while Hispanic and multiracial students were most likely to transfer with a CTC degree at 38 percent each.

**Figure 13. In 2020-21, more than half of bachelor’s earners 25 and older had transferred in with a transfer degree.**



Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

Figure 13 shows how students’ transfer pathways varied by age and WCG status among those who transferred into a public institution and earned a bachelor’s degree in the 2020-21 academic year. Analyses in this report consider two age groups: (1) students who entered at 24 or younger and (2) students who entered at 25 or older.

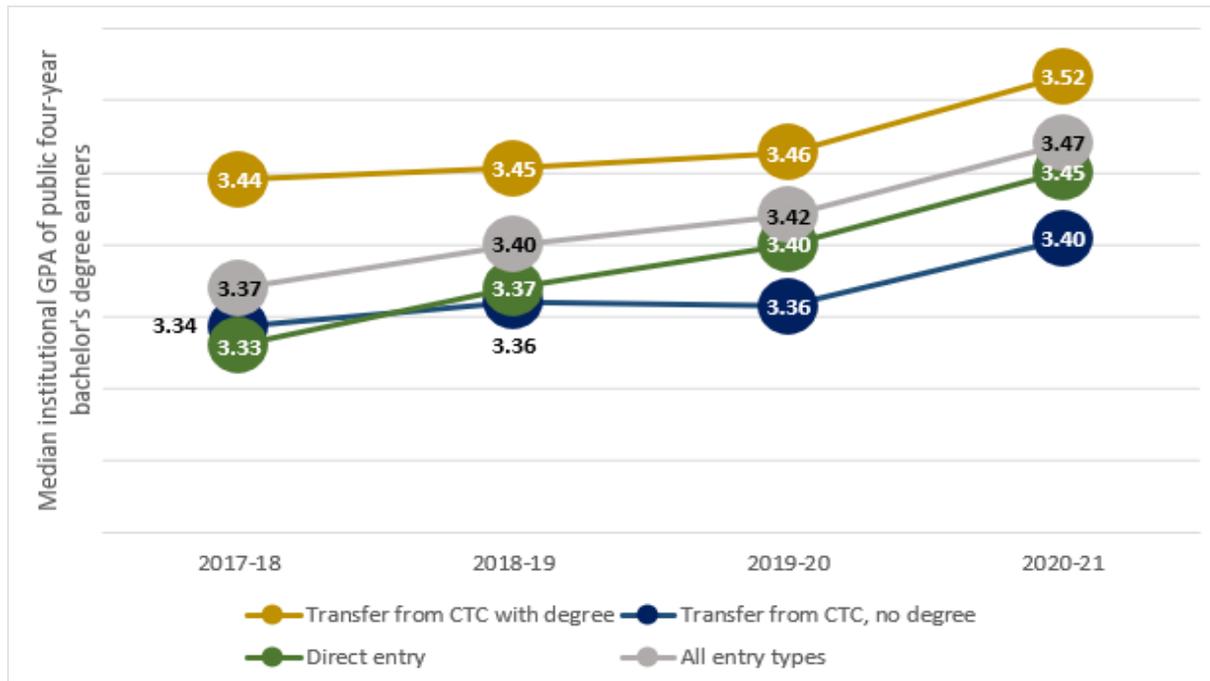
Older graduates were more than twice as likely to have transferred (96 percent) than their younger peers (45 percent).<sup>36</sup> Graduates who were WCG recipients were also more likely to have transferred (64 percent) than their peers who were not WCG recipients (46 percent).

Regardless of age or WCG status, transferring in with a transfer degree was the most common pathway among graduates who transferred.

<sup>36</sup> Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

The median graduates of public four-year institutions who transferred with a degree earned a higher institutional GPA than the median direct-entry graduate.

**Figure 14. Between 2017–18 and 2020-21, the median bachelor’s degree earner who entered a public four-year institution with a transfer degree consistently had a higher institutional GPA than either the median graduate who entered without a transfer degree or the median direct-entry graduate.**



Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public four-year bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2017-18 to 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are not included.

A student’s academic performance is both a reflection of their academic capabilities and the quality of their prior academic preparation. If community colleges are as effective as four-year institutions in preparing students for upper-division undergraduate coursework, students who enter a four-year with a transfer degree should perform at least as well in upper-division coursework as their peers who entered a four-year directly. As Figure 14 shows, the median<sup>37</sup> public four-year graduate who transferred with a

<sup>37</sup> The relevant dataset includes the median institutional GPA for Running Start DTA students and the median institutional GPA for Transfer Degree students separately, which make up CTC transfer degree students, but does not include the median institutional GPA for all CTC transfer degree students. It also includes the median institutional GPA for Running Start Transfer students and the median institutional GPA for CTC Transfer students separately, which make up students who transfer from a CTC without a degree, but does not include the median institutional GPA for all students who transfer from a CTC without a degree. To estimate the median institutional GPA for CTC transfer degree students, we calculated the weighted average between the median institutional GPA for Running Start DTA students and the median institutional GPA for Transfer Degree students. To estimate the median institutional GPA for students who transfer from a CTC without a degree, we calculated the weighted average between the median institutional GPA for Running Start Transfer students and the median institutional GPA for CTC Transfer students.

## 2023 Washington transfer degree effectiveness update

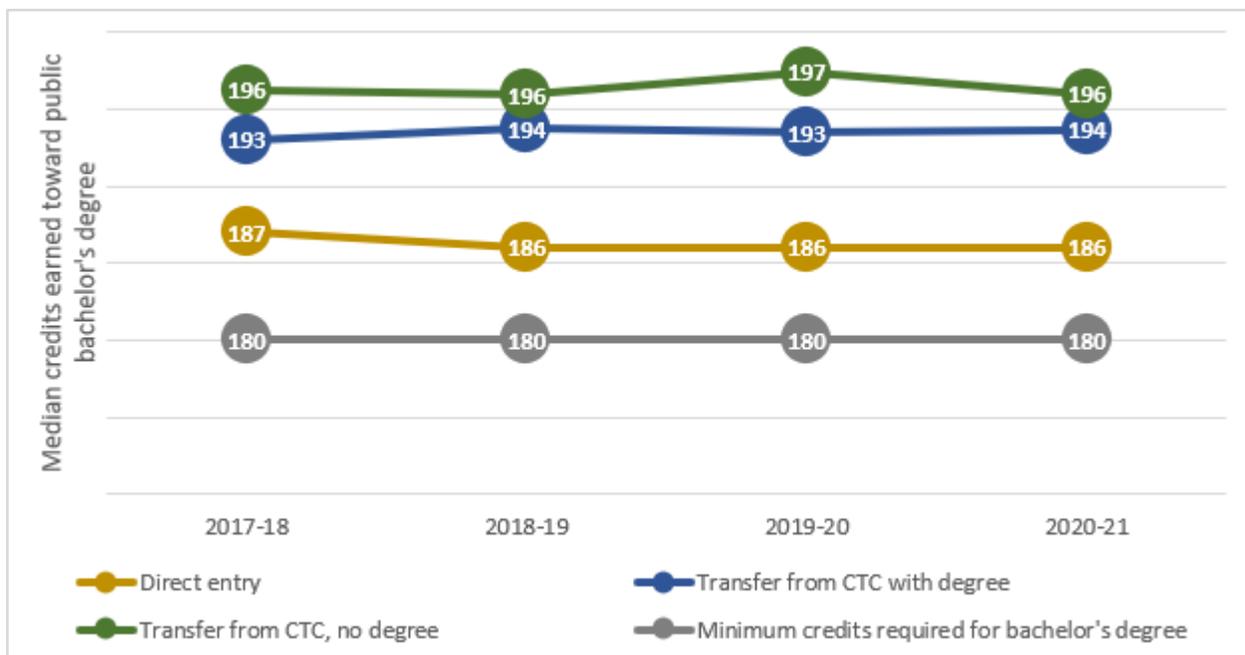
transfer degree consistently graduated with a higher institutional GPA than both the median graduate who transferred from a CTC without a degree and the median direct-entry graduate.

In addition to academic performance, another indicator of transfer degree effectiveness is credit accumulation. Washington's transfer degrees were created, in part, to provide an efficient pathway to a bachelor's degree for students who start at a community college. Disparities in the number of credits between transfer students and direct entry students is an indication that this goal is not being met.

The following analyses examine credit accumulation across bachelor's degree earners who entered public institutions directly from high school and those who transferred from a CTC, across all students and by race, ethnicity, age, and WCG status.

*The median bachelor's degree earner with a transfer degree earned fewer credits than other CTC transfers.*

**Figure 15. From 2017-18 through 2020-21, the median public bachelor's degree earner who entered directly from high school earned fewer credits than the median bachelor's degree earner who transferred from a CTC, regardless of whether they transferred with a degree.**



Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2017-18 to 2020-21 from ERDC.  
Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers and students who participated in Running Start are included.

Figure 15 shows the median credits earned over time for both CTC transfer and direct entry students who earned a bachelor's degree at a public institution. In each year from 2017-18 to 2020-21,<sup>38</sup> the median bachelor's degree earner who entered a public institution directly from high school earned

<sup>38</sup> See footnote 44.

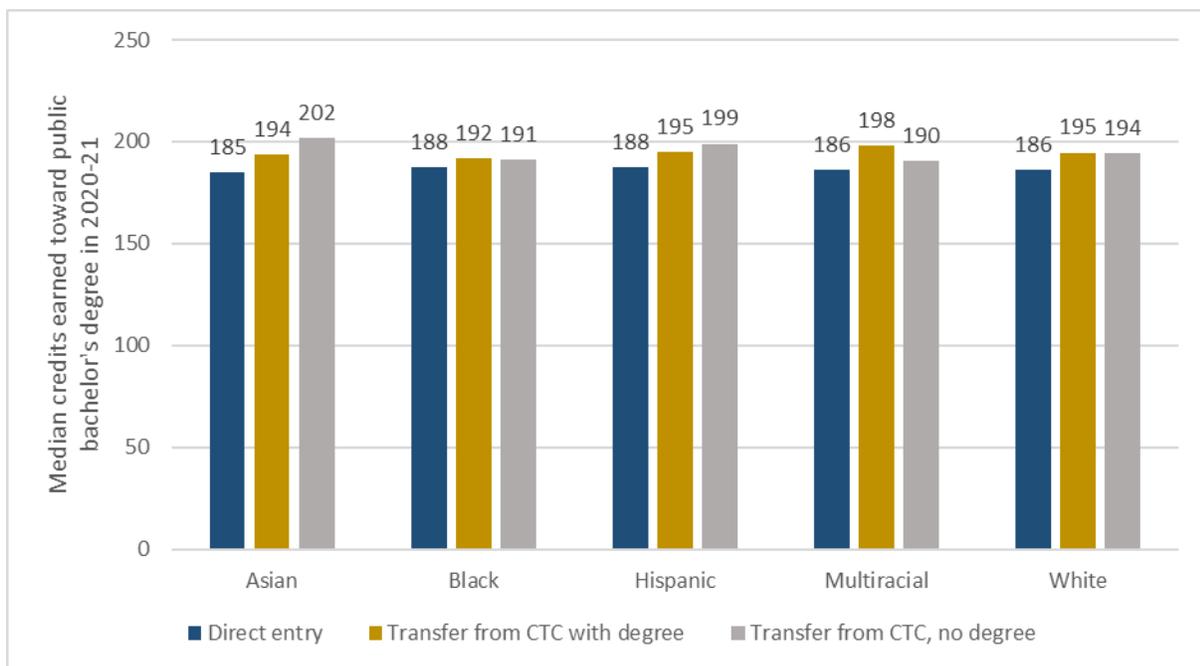
fewer credits than the median bachelor’s degree earner who transferred from a CTC. However, among transfer students, the median graduate who transferred in with a transfer degree consistently earned fewer credits than the median graduate who transferred in without a degree.

## Did credit accumulation vary by race and ethnicity?

The median bachelor’s degree earner who entered a public institution directly from high school consistently earned fewer credits than either the median CTC transfer with a degree or the median CTC transfer without a degree within each racial and ethnic student group.<sup>39</sup>

However, there was variation across racial and ethnic subgroups in credit accumulation between transfer students who transferred with a degree and transfer students who did not. For Asian and Hispanic students, the median bachelor’s degree earner who transferred from a CTC with a degree earned fewer credits than the median bachelor’s degree earner who transferred without a degree. However, the opposite was true for Black, White, and multiracial students. The credit difference between transfer students was largest among multiracial students: the median credits earned by CTC transfers with a degree was 8 credits more than the median credits earned by CTC transfer without a degree, compared to only a 1 credit gap for Black students and White students.

**Figure 16. In 2020-21, multiracial bachelor’s degree earners who transferred in with a degree earned more median credits than their peers who transferred in without a transfer degree.**



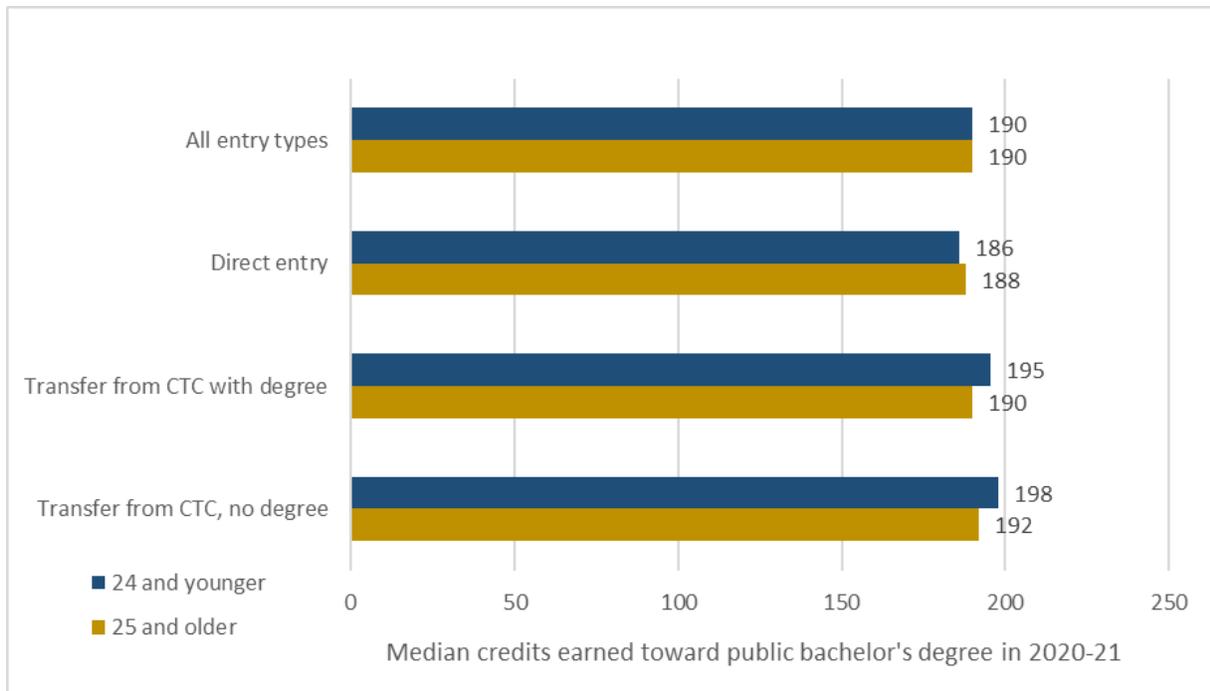
Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers and students who participated in Running Start are included.

<sup>39</sup> Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

Figure 16 shows the median number of credits that transfer and direct entry students earned by racial and ethnic subgroups.

### Did credit accumulation vary by age?

**Figure 17. Within each age group in 2020-21, the median public bachelor's degree graduate who transferred in with a degree earned fewer credits than the median graduate who transferred without a degree and more credits than the median graduate who entered directly after high school.**



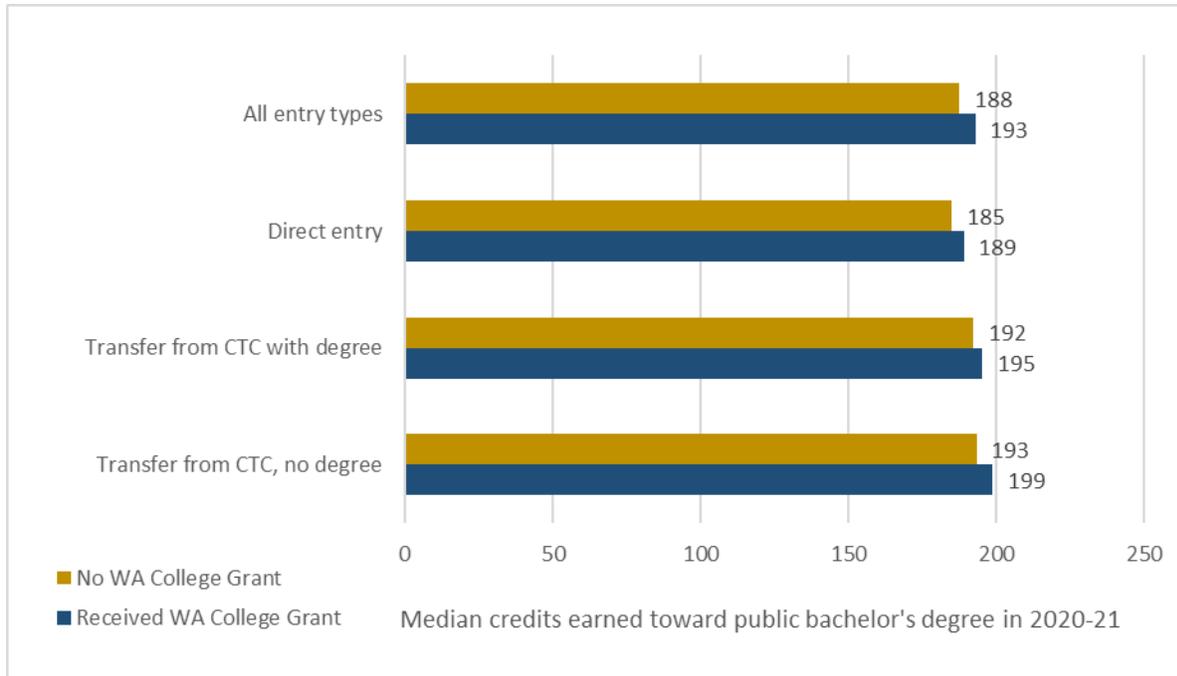
Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers and students who participated in Running Start are included.

In addition to analyzing differences in credit accumulation by racial and ethnic subgroups, this report includes similar analyses by age. Consistent with trends across all racial and ethnic subgroups, Figure 17 shows that graduates who entered directly from high school earned fewer median credits than those who transferred, regardless of age.

Among graduates who transferred, both younger and older graduates who transferred with a degree earned fewer median credits than those in their age group who transferred without one. However, regardless of whether they transferred with or without a degree, older graduates who transferred accumulated fewer median credits than their younger peers.

**Did credit accumulation vary by socioeconomic status?**

**Figure 18. Regardless of entry type, the median graduate who received a WCG in 2020-21 earned more credits than the median graduate who did not receive a WCG.**



Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers and students who participated in Running Start are included.

Considering the significance of credit accumulation in relation to the overall cost of a degree, it is important to consider how credit accumulation may vary for students of various socioeconomic backgrounds. While public data on credit accumulation by student income or family background is not available, data on Washington College Grant (WCG) receipt is. Because students who qualify for and receive the WCG have lower family incomes, this report uses WCG reception as a proxy for income.

As shown in Figure 18, the median bachelor’s degree earner who received a WCG consistently earned more credits than the median graduate who did not receive one, regardless of whether the student was direct entry, transferred from CTC with a degree, or transferred from CTC without a degree.

The above analyses lend some credence to the idea that transferring into a four-year is not as efficient as entering a four-year immediately after high school. Regardless of race or ethnicity, age, or WCG status, direct entry students consistently earned fewer median credits than their peers who transferred prior to earning a bachelor’s degree. However, these analyses suggest that transferring to a four-year institution with a transfer degree is more efficient than transferring without one.

### The effectiveness of major-specific transfer degrees

Just as transferring with a degree can impact credit earned, so can the type of degree. Major-specific transfer degrees are specialized transfer degrees intended to provide on-ramps into specific bachelor's degree majors.

This section of the report examines the median credits earned toward a public bachelor's degree in major areas related to the following five transfer degrees:

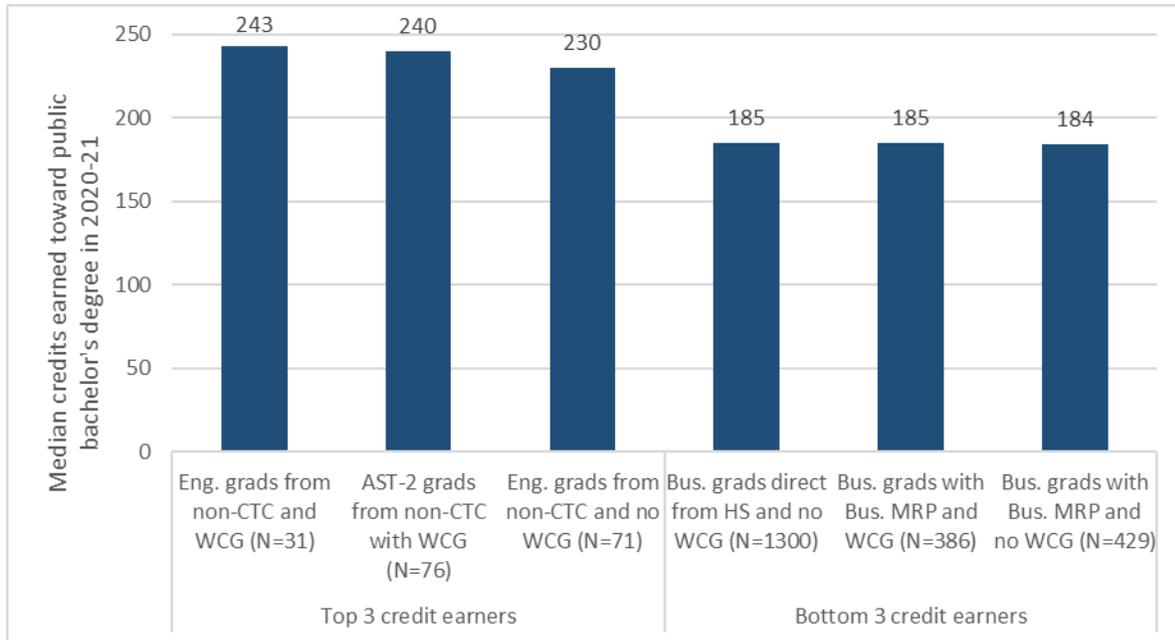
- **Associate of Science-Transfer Track 1 (AS-T 1)** - prepares students for bachelor's degrees in biological sciences, environmental/resource sciences, chemistry, geology, and earth science.
- **Associate of Science-Transfer Track 2 (AS-T 2)** - prepares students for bachelor's degrees in engineering, computer science, physics, and atmospheric sciences.
- **Associate of Biology Direct Transfer Agreement/Major Related Program (Biology DTA/MRP)** - prepares students for bachelor's degrees in biology.
- **Associate in Business Transfer Agreement/Major Related Program (Business DTA/MRP)** - prepares students for bachelor's degrees in business administration, including accounting, management, and management information systems.
- **Associate of Science-Transfer Track 2 Engineering Major Related Program (Engineering AS-T 2/MRP)** - offers three tracks that prepare students for degrees in: bioengineering and chemical engineering; computer engineering and electrical engineering; and mechanical engineering, civil engineering, aeronautical engineering, industrial engineering, and materials science engineering.

For each major area, the credit outcomes were analyzed for four types of graduates, based on how they entered the institution from which they received a bachelor's degree:

- Direct entry
- Transfer with a general DTA
- Transfer with associated major-specific transfer degree
- Transfer from a CTC without a transfer degree
- Transfer from a non-CTC institution (only used in Figure 19)

The report also disaggregates credit outcomes by WCG receipt as a proxy for income.

**Figure 19. In 2020-21, Business graduates who transferred in with a major-specific degree or entered directly from high school had the lowest median credits while two of the three groups with the highest median credits were Engineering majors.**



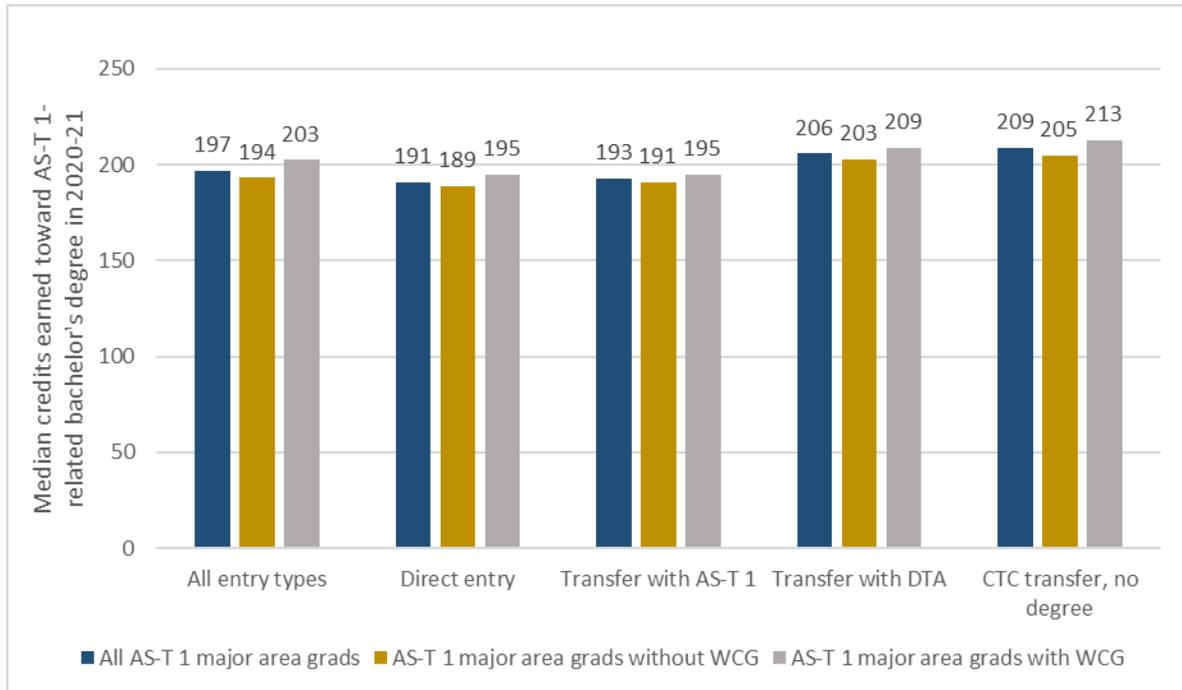
Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

Figure 19 shows the top and bottom three median credit earners by major area, entry type, and WCG status.

Out of the five major areas analyzed, the median graduate with Engineering and AS-T 2 bachelor’s degrees were among those with the highest credits by graduation, while the lowest median credit earners were all Business graduates.

WCG recipients were among both the highest and lowest median credit earners. However, the highest median earners were consistently students who had transferred in from non-CTC institutions and therefore, could not earn transfer degrees.

**Figure 20.** In 2020-21, the median AS-T 1 major area graduate who entered with an AS-T 1 earned slightly more credits than the median direct entry graduate, but fewer credits than the median transfer student without an AS-T 1.



Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

Figure 20 shows median credit accumulation by student entry type and WCG status for graduates with bachelor’s degree in an AS-T 1 major area. Regardless of WCG status, the median graduate who transferred in with a major-specific degree earned fewer credits than the median graduate who transferred in without one.

When looking at WCG status, the median student who received a WCG earned more credits than the median student who did not, and this was consistent across all entry types. Graduates who received a WCG and transferred from a non-CTC institution had the highest median credits, while direct entry graduates without the WCG had the lowest median credits.

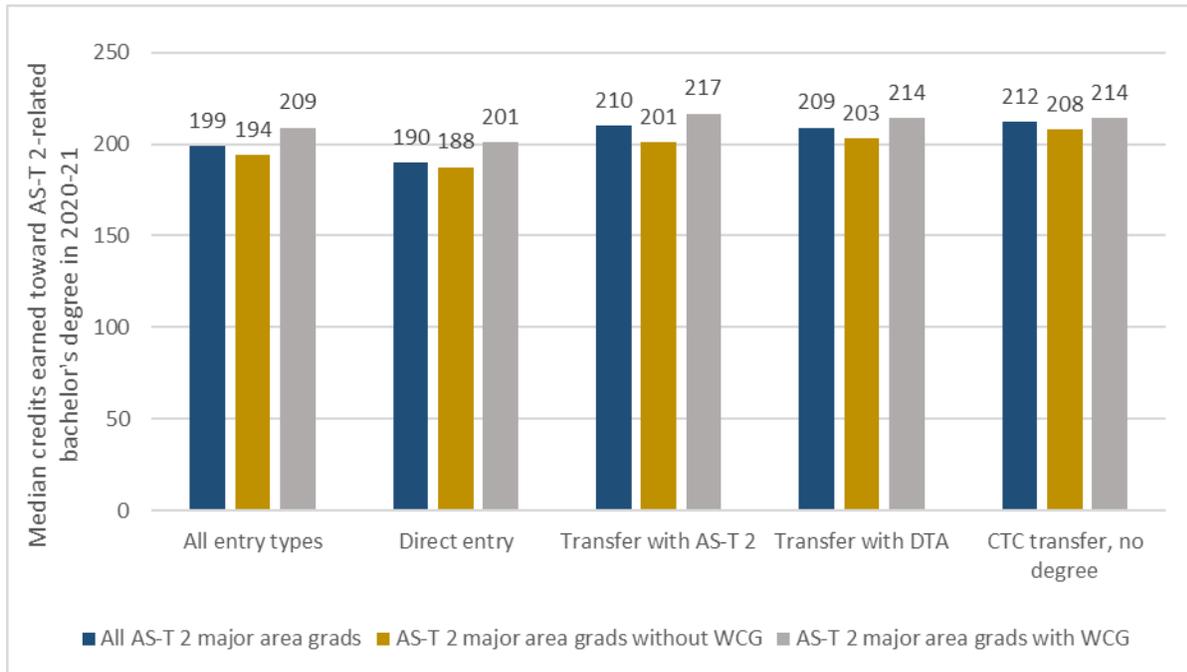
*Viewed solely through the lens of credit accumulation, the AS-T 2 transfer degree is an inefficient pathway to a bachelor’s degree.<sup>40</sup>*

During the 2021-22 academic year, among those who received a bachelor’s degree in an AS-T 2 major area, those who entered a public four-year institution directly from high school earned fewer median

<sup>40</sup> Credit accumulation is one way to measure degree efficiency. Other factors such as the environment, student choices, and circumstances, may provide additional insights into degree efficiency and could be the subject of future studies.

credits than those who had transferred, regardless of transfer type.<sup>41</sup> This was the case for both WCG recipients and those who did not receive the WCG.

**Figure 21. In 2021-22, the median graduates with an AS-T 2-related major who transferred in with a major-specific degree and received the WCG earned the most credits, even more than graduates who had transferred in without a degree.**



Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

As shown in Figure 21, the median AS-T 2 graduate who transferred with an AS-T 2 earned more credits than the median AS-T 2 graduate who transferred in with a DTA. For WCG recipients in particular, the median AS-T 2 graduate who transferred with an AS-T 2 earned more credits than both those who transferred in with a DTA and those who transferred in without a degree.

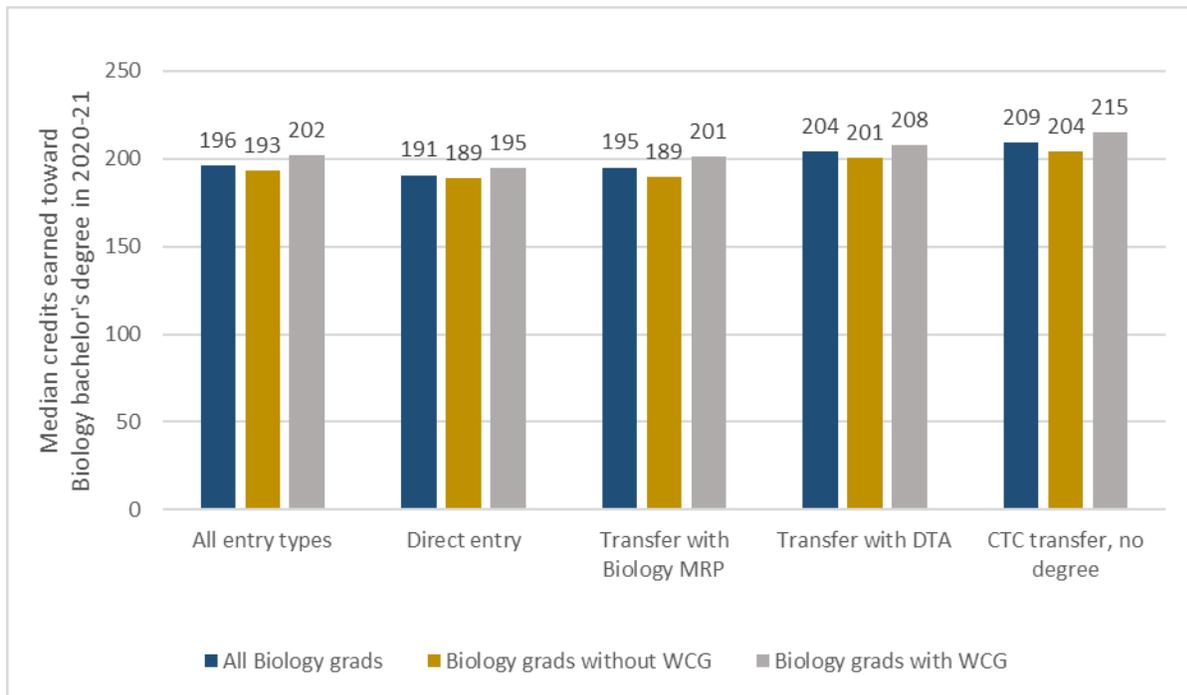
As was the case with AS-T 1 graduates, the median AS-T 2 graduate who received a WCG earned more credits than the median AS-T 2 graduate who did not receive the WCG. However, this difference in median credits accumulated was even greater for graduates with an AS-T 2 degree. The median graduate with a WCG earned 209 credits, compared to the 194 earned by the median graduate without WCG. For reference, a 15-credit difference is roughly equivalent to three or four more courses, with some variability across institutions.

Among those who had received a WCG and graduated from a public institution in 2021-22 with a Biology degree, the median direct entry graduate accumulated fewer credits than the median Biology graduate

<sup>41</sup> Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Running Start students are included in this data-set.

who transferred, regardless of transfer type.<sup>42</sup> However, among graduates without a WCG, the median Biology graduate who transferred in with a Biology MRP earned the same number of credits as the median Biology graduate who entered directly from high school.

**Figure 22. Among Biology graduates in 2021-22 who received the WCG, those who transferred in with a Biology MRP graduated with the same number of median credits as those who had entered directly after high school.**



Source: Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

As shown in Figure 22, for both WCG recipients and non-recipients, the median Biology graduate who transferred in with a Biology MRP earned fewer credits than their peers who transferred with a DTA or without a degree. This suggests that the Biology MRP may be a more efficient pathway toward a bachelor's degree in Biology than other forms of transfer.

Across all entry types, the median Biology graduate who received a WCG accumulated more credits than their peers with similar entry types who did not receive a WCG.

<sup>42</sup> Ithaca S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

*The Business DTA/MRP remains an effective tool for earning a business bachelor's degree.*

**Figure 23.** During the 2021-22 academic year, Business bachelor's degree earners who transferred with a Business degree accumulated fewer median credits than both other transfer students and direct entry graduates.

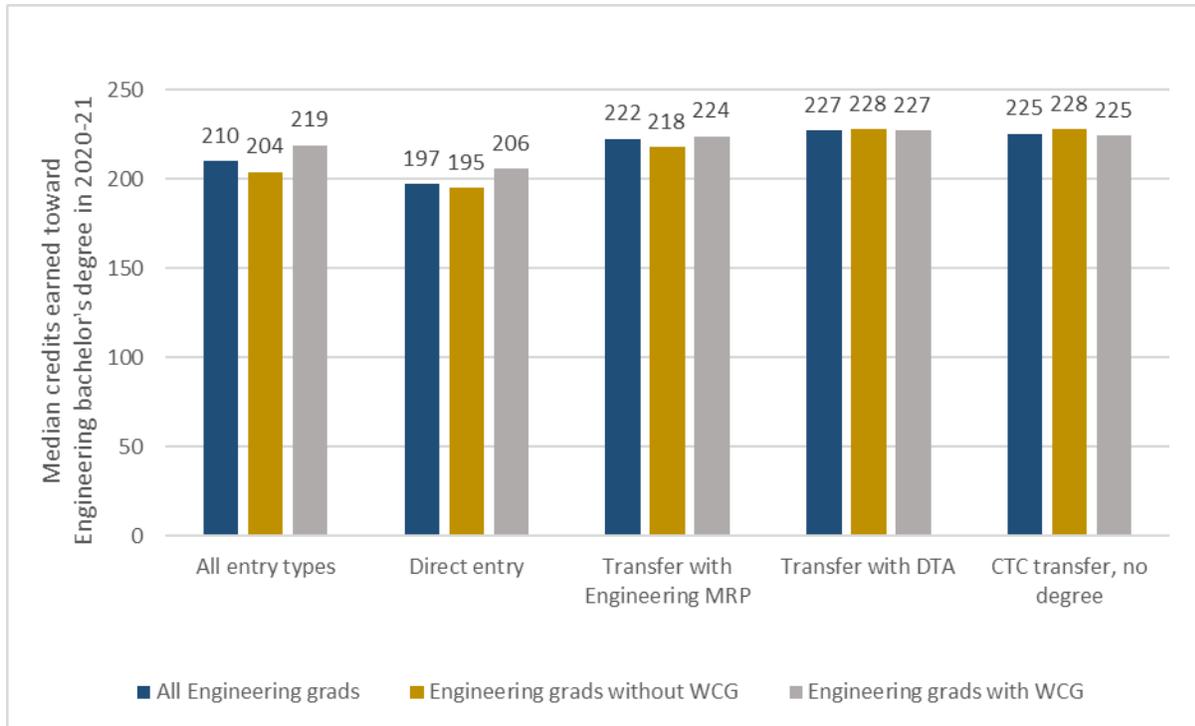


Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

Figure 23 shows median credits earned by entry type and WCG status for students who graduated with a Business bachelor's degree during the 2021-22 academic year. Out of the major areas analyzed, Business was the only major area in which the median graduate who entered a public four-year directly did not earn fewer credits than the median transfer student in each transfer pathway. The median graduate who transferred in with a Business transfer degree earned fewer credits than both the median transfer without a Business transfer degree and the median direct entry graduate.

Relative to graduates with AS-T 1 and AS-T 2 degrees, there was less variation in the number of median credits earned across graduates with Business degrees. While the median Business graduate who received the WCG still earned slightly more credits than the median Business graduate without the WCG, the median difference in credits is minimal.

**Figure 24. Engineering graduates in 2021-22 who entered a public four-year institution directly after high school accumulated fewer median credits than their peers who transferred, regardless of transfer type or WCG status.**



Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

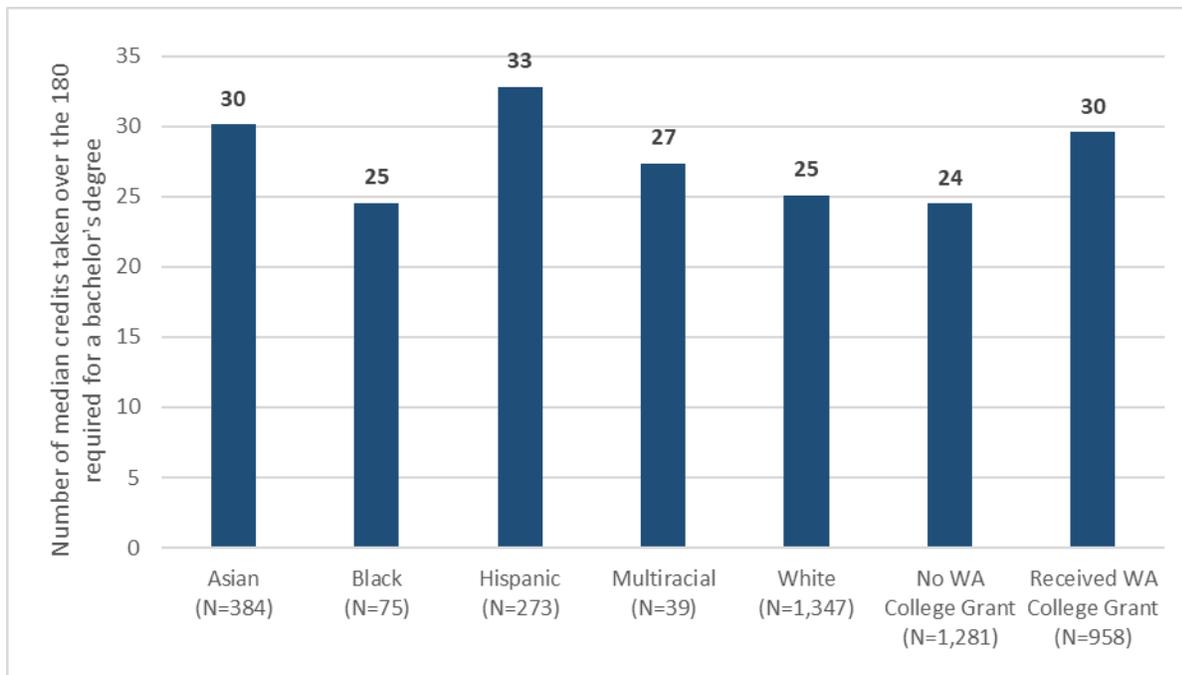
Figure 21 shows that among Engineering bachelor’s degree earners, those who entered a public four-year directly from high school graduated with fewer median credits than their peers who transferred, regardless of transfer type or WCG status. The median graduate who transferred in with an Engineering MRP accumulated fewer credits than the median graduate who transferred with a DTA or without a degree, and this difference was larger among graduates who had not received the WCG than those who did. However, across all entry types, the median Engineering graduate earned more credits than the median graduate in any of the other four major areas analyzed.

Across most other major areas, the median WCG recipient and graduate earned more credits than the median graduate of the same entry type who did not receive a WCG. However, for Engineering graduates that transferred with a DTA or without a degree, the median WCG recipient and graduate earned fewer credits than the median graduate of the same entry type who did not receive a WCG.

For students who transfer, the transfer pathway matters in terms of credit accumulation as well as time and money spent towards a degree. The analyses above suggest that transferring with a major-specific degree can often, but not always, provide a more efficient path toward a bachelor’s degree.

Running Start, a dual credit program that allows 11th and 12th graders to earn credits at a CTC, is another pathway that allows students to enter a four-year institution having already completed some credits toward their degree.<sup>43</sup> Running Start students may or may not enter a four-year directly after high school, so it is worth examining their credit progression separately from either transfer or direct entry students.

**Figure 25. In 2020-21, the median public bachelor’s degree earner who participated in a Running Start program during high school earned at least two quarters worth of credits beyond the 180 required for a bachelor’s degree, regardless of race, ethnicity, or WCG reception.**



Source: Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor’s degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC. Note: CTC applied baccalaureate (BAS) completers are included.

Figure 25 shows the median number of credits earned beyond the 180 required for a bachelor’s degree for public bachelor’s degree earners in 2020-21 who took Running Start in high school, a group that accounts for about a fifth of total transfer degrees awarded.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> “Running Start,” *Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges*, <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/running-start/>.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Wootan, “2021 Washington transfer associate degree effectiveness update,” *Washington Student Achievement Council*, February 2021.

Regardless of race, ethnicity, or WCG status, the median graduate who took Running Start graduated with at least two quarters worth of credits<sup>45</sup> beyond the minimum required to earn a bachelor's degree.<sup>46</sup>

Running Start graduates who were Hispanic, Asian, or received the WCG had even higher median credits at the time of graduation. During the 2020-21 academic year, the median Hispanic graduate who took Running Start graduated with almost a year worth of credits (three quarters) beyond the requirements of a bachelor's degree.

### Transfer Updates

In addition to measuring transfer effectiveness, this report also includes transfer degree updates and other transfer improvements since the 2021 report.

#### New Transfer Degrees

*Practical Nursing Program to Associate in Nursing DTA/MRP went into effect Fall 2022.*

This pathway is commonly referred to as "LPN to ADN" and prepares a student for licensure as a registered nurse through the Washington community and technical colleges Practice Nursing Program, as well as for entry into a Bachelor of science in Nursing completion degree.

*Practical Nursing Program to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) MRP went into effect Fall 2022.*

This pathway is commonly referred to as "LPN to BSN" and prepares a student for entry into an LPN to Bachelor of Science in Nursing completion program which concludes with a BSN degree.

#### Other Improvements in Transfer

To support Washington state's goal of increasing postsecondary attainment among working-age adults to 70 percent, in 2022 Washington participated in a multi-state initiative from the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the State Higher Education Executive Organizations (SHEEO). Facilitated by WSAC, the Transfer Equity Project examined key aspects of Washington's transfer ecosystem for students, specifically toward achieving equitable student outcomes relating to known equity gaps for BIPOC and low-income students. The full report can be found at <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Washington%20Transfer%20Equity%20Project%202023.pdf>.

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<sup>45</sup> A student taking 12 credits per quarter would be considered a full-time student for financial aid purposes, though students would need to enroll in 15 credits per term in order to complete a 90-credit associate degree within 2 years.

<sup>46</sup> Ithaka S+R staff analysis of public bachelor's degree completions for academic year 2020-21 from ERDC.

## Discussion

This section outlines recommendations for future research on the state of transfer in Washington and strategies to consider for improving the transfer process in the state.

### Recommendations for future research on the state of transfer in Washington

*Expand focus on transfer degree effectiveness to transfer process effectiveness.*

By predominantly focusing on the effectiveness of transfer degrees, the analyses excluded key points in a student's collegiate career that are likely associated with their outcomes. Future research on transfer should focus on the entirety of the transfer process – including transfer degree effectiveness – that students engage with. For example, one of the most significant and common challenges for many transfer students is the inability to count their previously earned credits toward degree requirements at their new institution. In fact, it has been estimated that 43 percent of credits are lost during transfer.<sup>47</sup> Credit loss often necessitates repeating completed courses, which costs students time, wastes their often-limited financial resources, increases their debt, puts financial aid eligibility at risk, and ultimately decreases the likelihood that they graduate.<sup>48</sup>

One way to assess the effectiveness of the transfer process is to measure credit loss at the point of transfer using individual degree audits. Below is a list of measures that could be identified and analyzed to better understand average credit loss at each four-year institution and across the state:

- How courses at each community college translate to any other course at four-year institutions in the state
- Share of transferred credits with satisfactory grades that count towards a student's desired degree at the four-year institution
- Share of students who are able to count all of their transferred credits with satisfactory grades towards their degree at the four-year institution
- Number of days between a student's transfer commitment and the four-year institution's logging of the student's transcript evaluation

There are a number of transfer policies that Washington might consider in light of findings from these analyses, including developing new articulation agreements between community colleges and public four-year institutions in the state; modifying associate, transfer, and bachelor's degree requirements; or adopting statewide common course numbering.

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<sup>47</sup> "Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges in Transferring College Credits," *Government Accountability Office*, August 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/686530.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> David B. Monaghan and Paul Attewell, "The Community College Route to the Bachelor's Degree," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(1), 70–91, 1 March 2015, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373714521865>.

*Expand data collection to provide a more comprehensive and complete picture of student outcomes related to the transfer process.*

Due to data availability constraints, this report focused primarily on transfer degree recipients and transfer students who graduated with a bachelor's degree. To gain insight into how transfer systems can better serve students, future research should expand the student sample to include the outcomes of the more than half of community college students in Washington who intended to transfer but did not as well as students who transferred but did not graduate with a bachelor's degree.

Even within the report's narrow focus on transfer students and transfer degrees, gaps and incongruencies in how data are collected and aggregated within and across postsecondary systems made it difficult to assess how outcomes differed between particular student subgroups. For example, like students who enroll in transfer degree programs, students in applied baccalaureate programs are community college students who have chosen a pathway to a bachelor's degree. It would be useful for state policymakers to know how outcomes for students in applied baccalaureate programs compare to those of students who attempt or earn a transfer degree. Unfortunately, due to how data on applied baccalaureate students at CTCs is reported and aggregated in the datasets used in this report, answers to these questions are murky. These students were included in some datasets and excluded in others.<sup>49</sup> When they were included, they were often grouped with students who did not intend to earn a degree in the first place. Alignment on data collection processes across entities that collect and manage student data on two-year and four-year institutions – SBCTC and ERDC (including PCHEES) – would be one way to address information gaps and improve the utility of transfer data for future research.

*Employ qualitative methodologies to assess the transfer process.*

While the analyses of quantitative data provide an initial picture of transfer degree effectiveness in the state, supplemental qualitative and mixed-methods analyses would provide a more in-depth understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the transfer pipeline and transfer degrees offered in Washington. Conducting student focus groups and interviews and administering surveys could provide insights not apparent in the quantitative analysis, including:

- The motivating factors behind the types of degrees and pathways that students pursue
- The primary drivers of student attrition and obstacles to transfer
- Students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the transfer pathway
- Students' experiences engaging in the transfer process
- Students' recommendations for how to improve the transfer process

### **Considerations for improving the transfer process**

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<sup>49</sup> Students enrolled in applied baccalaureate programs are included in SBCTC's Enrollment Data and Credentials Awarded dashboards but excluded from SBCTC's First-Time Entering Student Outcomes dashboard, which includes metrics on retention, completion, and post-college outcomes. ERDC data contains information on credit accumulation but not institutional GPA for CTC applied baccalaureate degree completers, and the data does not allow for disaggregation across students who completed an applied baccalaureate and those who completed a baccalaureate degree at a non-CTC.

### *Assess and modify course equivalencies and degree program requirements to increase transferability and degree applicability of credits.*

The median graduate at a public institution in Washington who transferred with a transfer degree earned eight more credits than the median graduate who entered a four-year institution directly from high school, and 14 more credits than what is typically required to graduate. The magnitude of these differences varied by students' major and transfer pathway, with median total credits ranging from 184 to 243 credits.<sup>50</sup> While the number of lost credits among these students is certainly lower than national estimates referenced in the previous section, this is likely in part because these are students who went on to successfully complete a bachelor's degree. Some of the analyses included in this report have shed light on the most inefficient pathways to a degree. Using individual degree audits to identify the factors that drive lost and excess credits and how those factors vary by students' demographic and academic characteristics can equip state and institution leaders with the necessary information to streamline transfer pathways accordingly.

### *Simplify and standardize reverse transfer policies at public four-year institutions in the state.*

In the most recent year of available data, 29 percent of students who entered a CTC in Washington and did not complete an associate degree went on to transfer to an in-state four-year institution within six years. The benefits to students who earn an associate degree are well-documented: they earn, on average, up to \$7,000 more per year than those who enter college but do not complete an award,<sup>51</sup> and they are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than students who transfer without earning an associate degree or who earn a more technical degree.<sup>52</sup> One way to increase the percentage of transfer students who have an associate degree is through reverse transfer policies, which allow students enrolled at a four-year institution to transfer credit back to the community college and earn their associate degree.<sup>53</sup> While Washington's public four-year institutions have reverse transfer policies, eligibility requirements vary by institution, some of which rely heavily on students to take action. Institutions may consider simplifying, modifying, and standardizing eligibility requirements to increase the number of students who are able to earn an associate degree through reverse transfer.

### *Implement common course numbering between two- and four-year institutions in Washington.*

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<sup>50</sup> For example, transfer students enrolled in AS-T 1, Biology, or Business earned comparable numbers of credits as their counterparts who entered directly from high school, while students who transferred from an Engineering or AS-T 2 program graduated with substantially higher numbers of credits than their counterparts who entered directly from high school.

<sup>51</sup> Clive Belfield and Thomas Bailey, "The Labor Market Returns to Sub-Baccalaureate College: A Review," *Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment*, March 2017, <https://capseecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/labor-market-returns-sub-baccalaureate-college-review.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Peter M. Crosta and Elizabeth M. Kopko, "Should Community College Students Earn an Associate Degree Before Transferring to a Four-Year Institution?," *Community College Research Center*, April 2014, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/associate-degree-before-transfer.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> "Reverse Transfer/Articulation," *Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges*, <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/transfer/reverse-articulation/>.

Common course numbering is one of the few transfer-related policies that the state of Washington has not implemented.<sup>54</sup> Offering common course numbers, titles, and descriptions, institutions can ease the administrative burden of articulating credits and increase transparency around course equivalencies, which would clarify what students need to take, thereby reducing credit loss and helping students more easily transfer across institutions. While adopting this practice is likely to yield a number of benefits to students and the participating institutions, it is worth acknowledging that it will involve significant coordination between faculty to align curriculum, and that in addition to the initial effort, continued coordination is necessary to maintain alignment over time.

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<sup>54</sup> "Transfer and Articulation 2022: All Data Points," *Education Commission of the States*, July 2022, <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/transfer-and-articulation-2022>.

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### About the Washington Student Achievement Council

The Washington Student Achievement Council is committed to increasing educational opportunities and attainment in Washington. The Council has three main functions:

- Lead statewide strategic planning to increase educational attainment.
- Administer programs that help people access and pay for college.
- Advocate for the economic, social, and civic benefits of higher education.

The Council has ten members. Four members represent each of Washington's major education sectors: four-year public baccalaureates, four-year private colleges, public community and technical colleges, and K-12 public schools. Six are citizen members, including two current students (one graduate student and one undergraduate student).

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