

Washington Public Enrollment Trends

Fall 2024 Enrollment Update

Research Brief

Jill Huynh and Rebecca Byrne

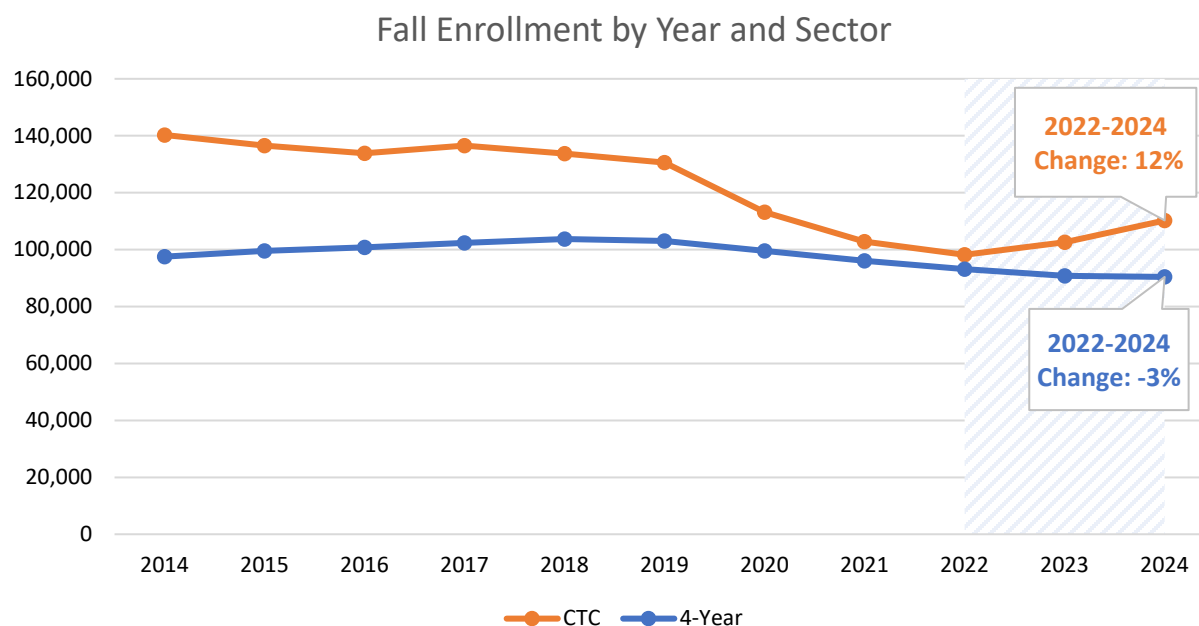
Updated May 14, 2025



Public postsecondary institutions in Washington show relatively promising undergraduate enrollment trends in the COVID-19 pandemic recovery period.

Overall undergraduate enrollment at Washington's public postsecondary institutions has not returned to pre-COVID levels; however, enrollment has grown or stabilized since spring 2023 when the public health crisis ended.¹ After dropping to a low of 98,184 award-seeking students in fall 2022, the community and technical colleges (CTCs) experienced a 12% rise in enrollment to over 110,000 students in 2024. Compared to the CTCs, public four-year institutions had experienced a less pronounced pandemic-induced decline in undergraduate enrollment from 2019. Post-pandemic enrollment from 2022 dropped 3% at four-year institutions. Enrollment at four-year institutions hovered just above 90,000 degree-seeking students in fall 2023 and fall 2024.

Enrollment is a key consideration as we strive towards the statewide goal of 70% postsecondary attainment for adults in Washington.² The remainder of this research brief describes fall enrollment



¹ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention declared the end of the COVID-19 federal public health emergency in May 2023. Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/end-of-phe.html>

² See <https://wsac.wa.gov/enrollment> for more on the Washington Student Achievement Council's strategy regarding postsecondary enrollment.

trends by financial aid status, race/ethnicity, gender, age, state residency, and enrollment intensity as well as for new students and transfer students. Figures show the last decade of fall enrollment numbers to offer historical context for Washington's public postsecondary institutions. Special attention is paid to the pandemic recovery period, which began in the 2022-2023 academic year. While the overall trend is relatively promising, differences in enrollment by student characteristics warrant further attention.

About the Data

Fall enrollment counts come from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) for the community and technical colleges and from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) for the public four-year institutions. Specifically, this report uses unduplicated counts of award-seeking CTC students (i.e., those intending to earn a degree or certificate, including students in apprenticeships) and unduplicated counts of degree-seeking undergraduates (i.e., those pursuing baccalaureate studies) at public four-year institutions. High school students participating in dual enrollment are excluded.

Figures include a shaded area that indicates the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2022-2023 academic year and the start of the pandemic recovery period. Data labels show the percent change in enrollment from fall 2022 to fall 2024.

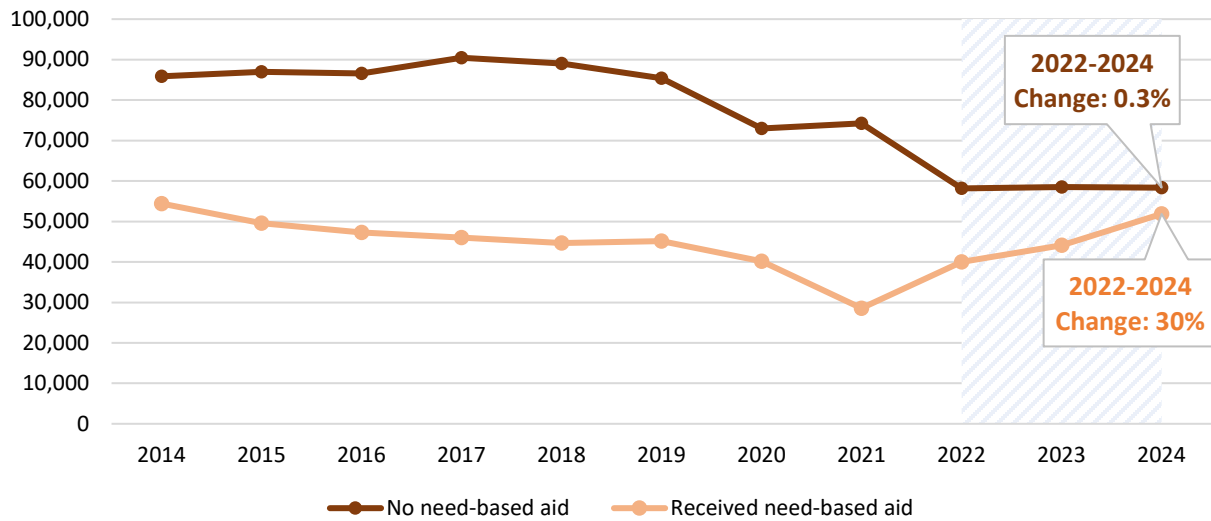
Enrollment by Financial Aid Status

Across public postsecondary institutions, 43% of fall 2024 students received need-based financial aid. Enrollment of these students³ exceeds pre-pandemic levels at both the CTCs and four-year institutions. In 2019, over 45,000 CTC students received need-based aid whereas that number is 51,876 as of 2024. Across public four-year institutions, enrollment of students with need-based aid increased from nearly 33,000 in 2019 to 35,080 in 2024.

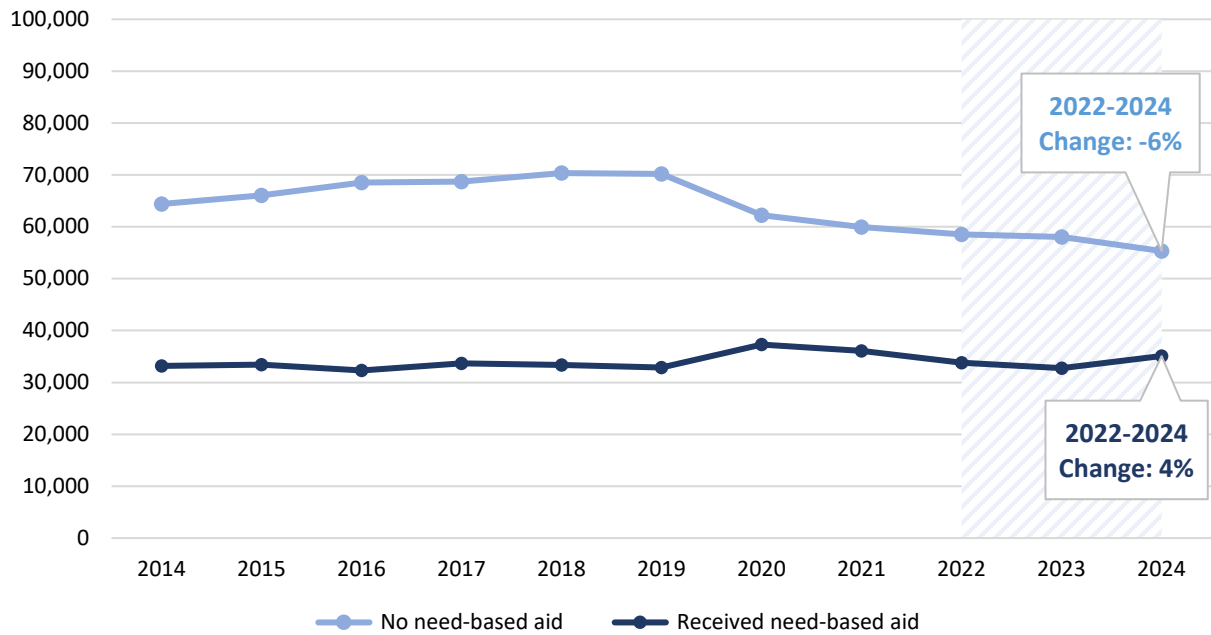
Notably, the [Washington College Grant](#) (WCG) made more Washington students eligible for need-based aid beginning in the 2020-2021 academic year. The expanded financial aid may have prevented otherwise greater pandemic-induced decreases in postsecondary enrollment. During the pandemic recovery period, enrollment of students receiving need-based aid has risen 30% at the CTCs and 4% at four-years. Enrollment for those without need-based aid has risen 0.3% at the community and technical colleges and dipped 6% at the four-year institutions.

³ Data on financial aid receipt comes directly from the 4-year institutions and CTCs, and data availability differs slightly across the two data sources. Due to data availability, this report defines financial assistance or financial aid at 4-year institutions as receiving the Washington College Grant or the Pell Grant only. This definition does not consider all other need-based aid such as institutional grants or Washington's College Bound Scholarship. At CTCs, financial assistance refers to students identified as economically disadvantaged in the CTC data system, which includes students receiving any need-based financial aid or waivers or who are enrolled in Workfirst, Basic Food Employment Training, or Displaced Homemaker programs. Source: <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/data-services/data-warehouse/student.pdf>

Public CTC Award-Seeking Fall Enrollment
by Financial Aid Status and Year



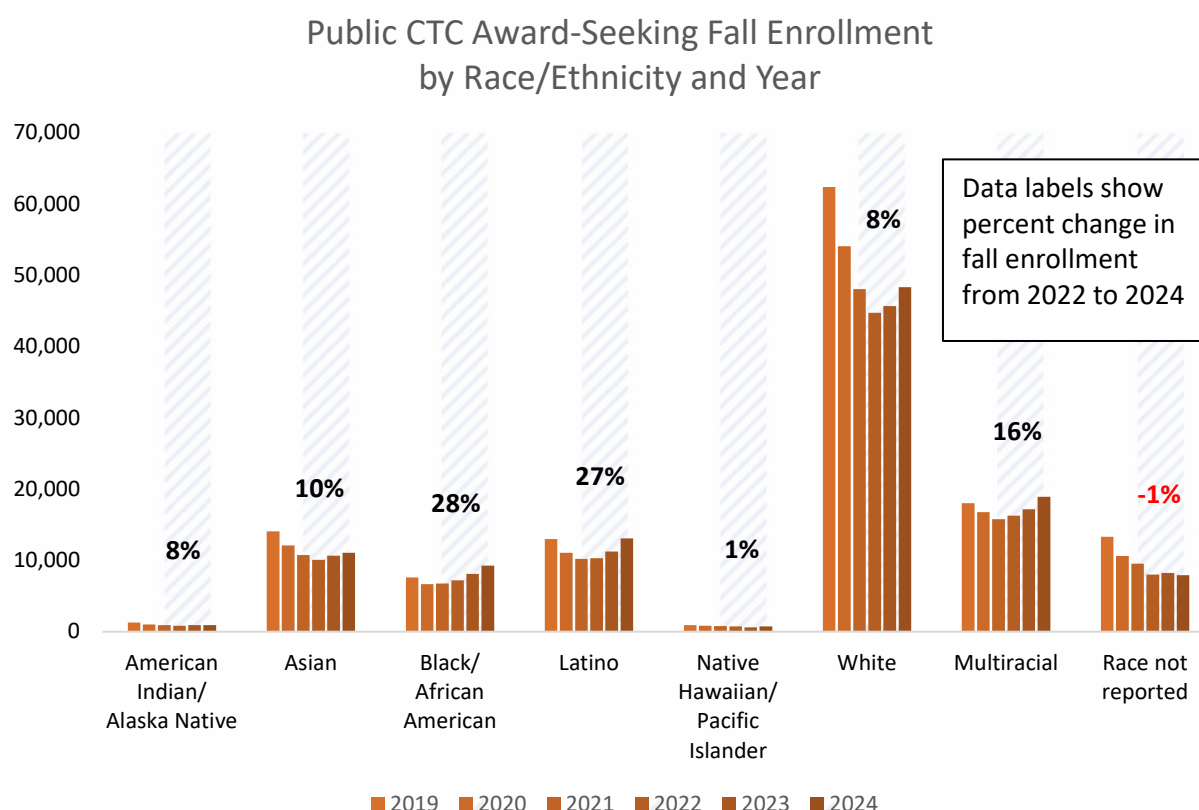
Public 4-Year Degree-Seeking Fall Enrollment
by Need-based Aid and Year



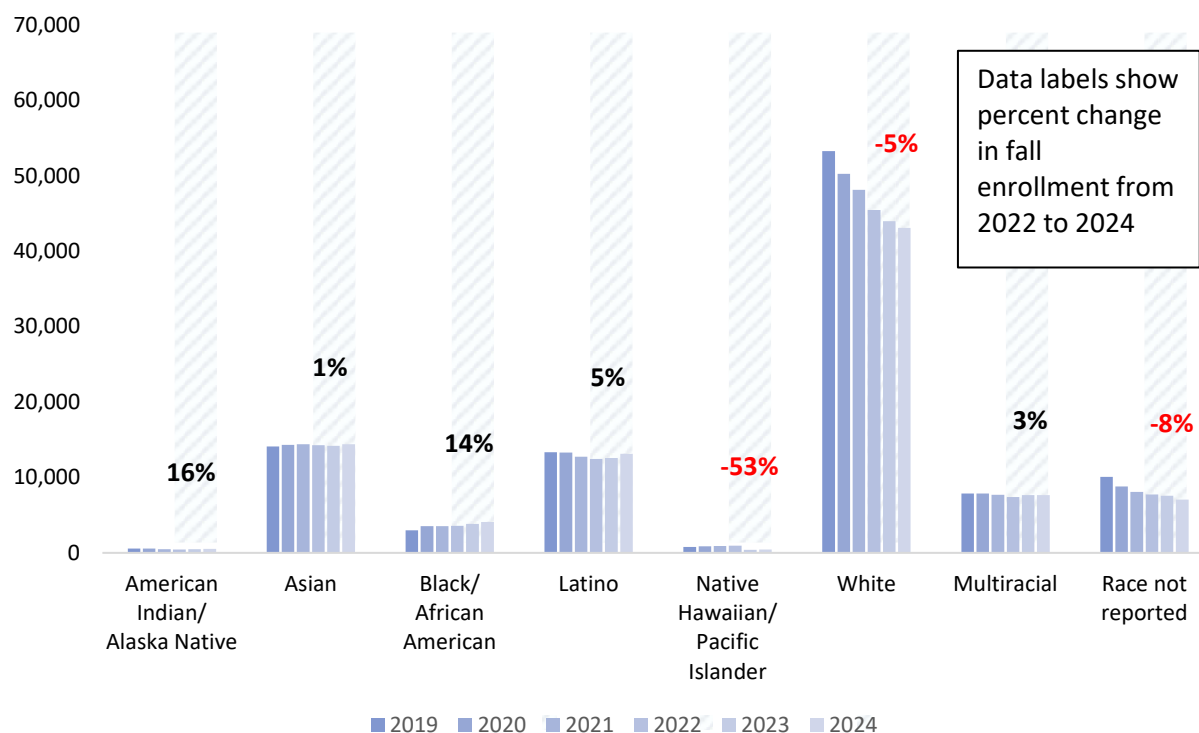
Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

Recovery from enrollment declines during the pandemic has varied by race and ethnicity. At community and technical colleges, enrollment by racial/ethnic group rose the most for Black/African American students with a 28.4% increase and Latino students with a 26.9% increase from 2022 to 2024. Meanwhile, American Indian/Alaska Native (16.2%) and Black/African American (13.9%) student enrollment rose the most at public four-year institutions. Across institution types, enrollment for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) students as well as those for whom race is not reported has shown the least recovery from the end of the pandemic; in fact, NHPI undergraduate enrollment declined 52.9% at four-year institutions since 2022.

White (45.6%), multiracial (13.2%), Latino (13.1%), and Asian (12.7%) students comprise the largest shares of fall 2024 enrollment across both CTCs and four-year institutions. Historically, these four groups have been the vast majority of public postsecondary enrollment in Washington.



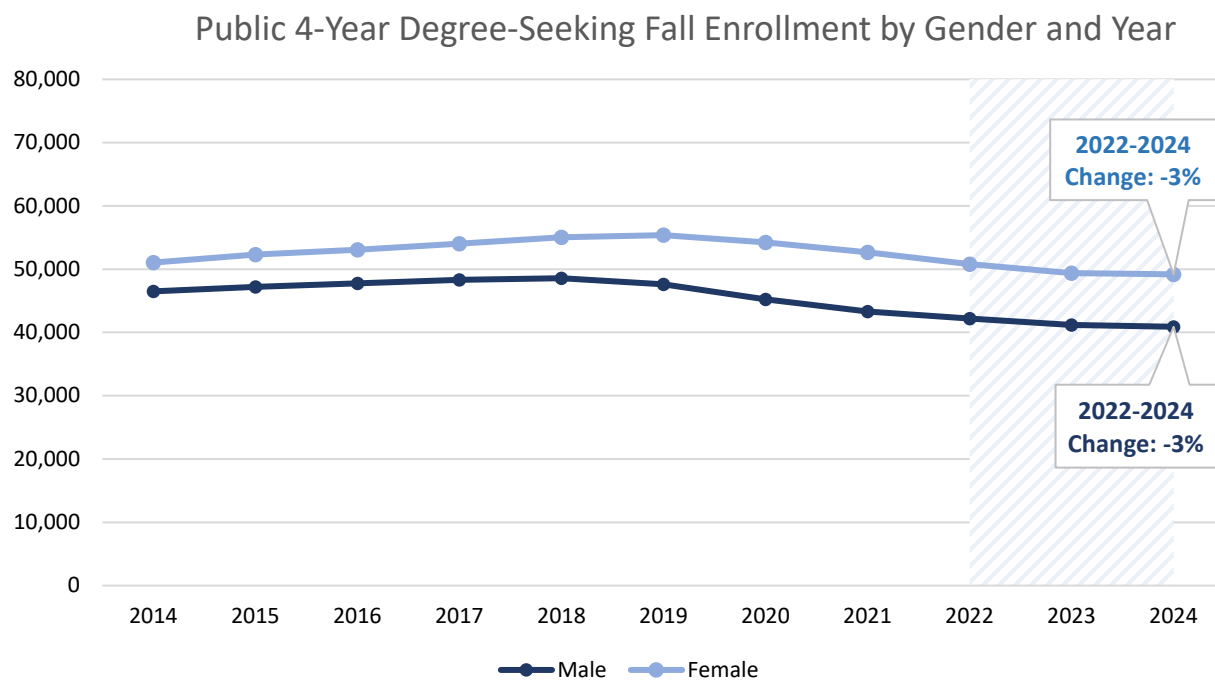
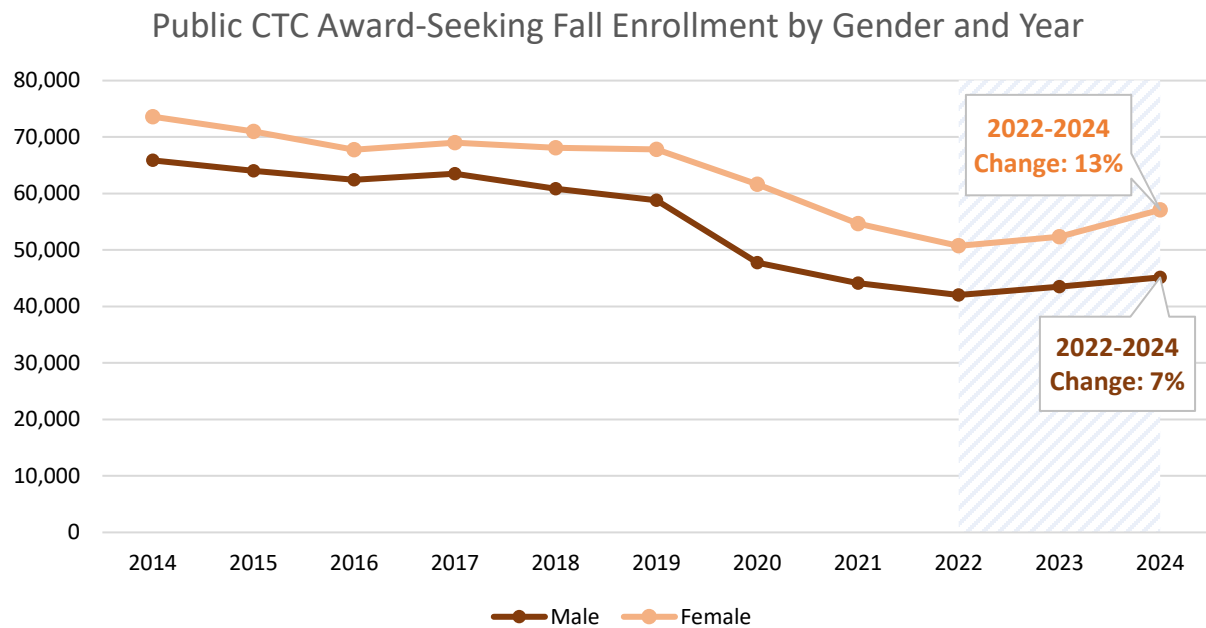
Public 4-Year Degree-Seeking Fall Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Year



Enrollment by Gender⁴

Regardless of institution type, female students have long comprised a greater proportion of Washington's postsecondary enrollment than male students. Despite not reaching pre-pandemic levels, female and male student enrollment at public community and technical colleges has increased 13% and 7%, respectively, since 2022. The 3% decrease in overall enrollment at four-year institutions during the pandemic recovery period is equally observed across female and male students.

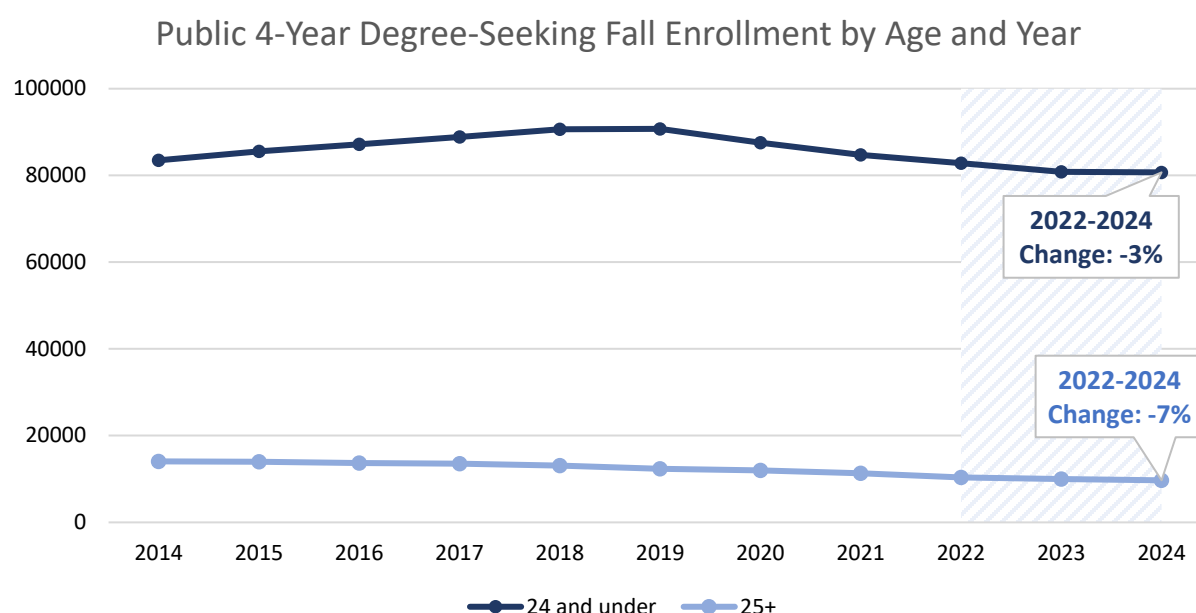
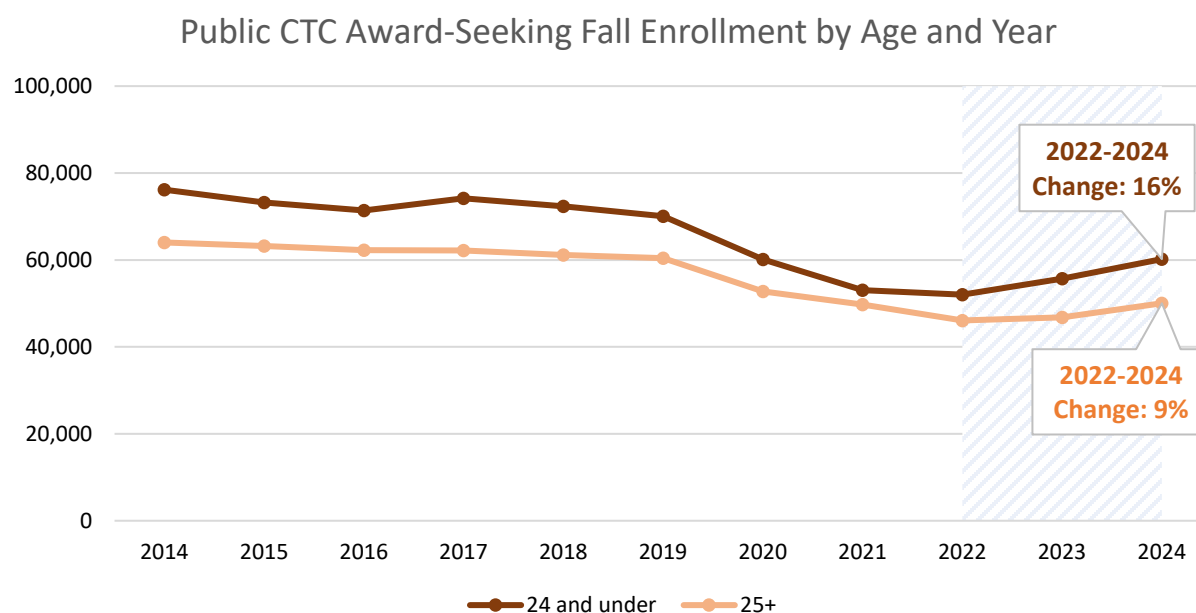
⁴ Neither SBCTC nor ERDC provided data on "X" students, defined as those who are "not exclusively male or female." Sources: <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/data-services/data-warehouse/student.pdf> and https://erdc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/PCHEES_Data_Submission_Guide.pdf



Enrollment by Age

Historically, older students (i.e., age 25 and older) account for a larger share of CTC enrollment than four-year enrollment, and younger students (i.e., age 24 and younger) are consistently the vast majority of postsecondary enrollees, overall. Students age 25 and older currently comprise 30% of all public postsecondary enrollment in Washington.

As of fall 2024, there are over 50,000 students age 25+ at community and technical colleges, and enrollment of these students increased 9% since the end of the pandemic; enrollment of younger CTC students increased 16% during this time. At four-year institutions, more than 80,000 undergraduates are 24 years old or younger. In the pandemic recovery period, enrollment has decreased 3% for younger students and 7% for older students at four-year institutions.

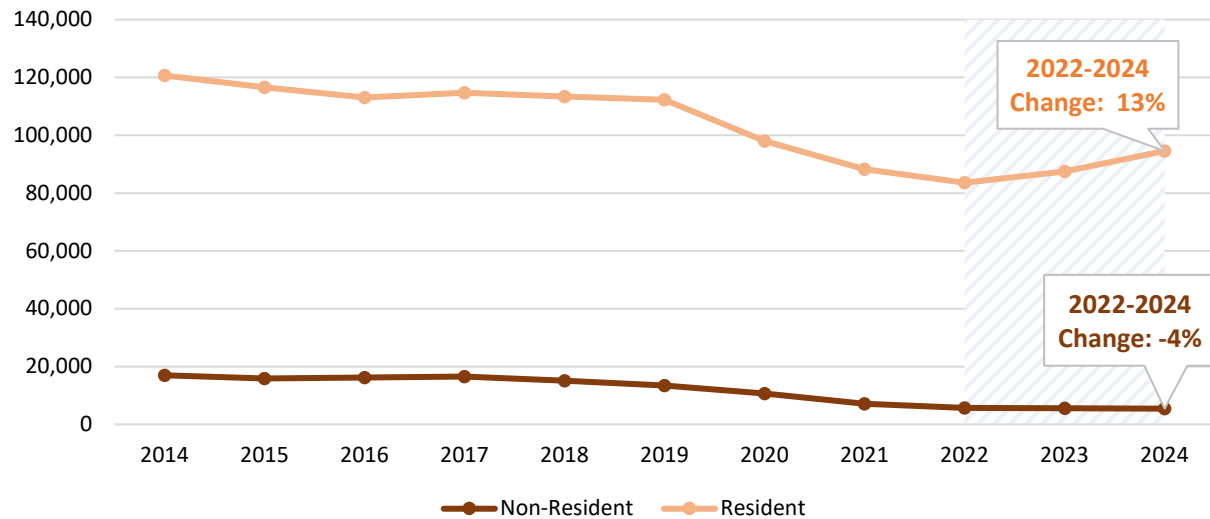


Enrollment by State Resident Status

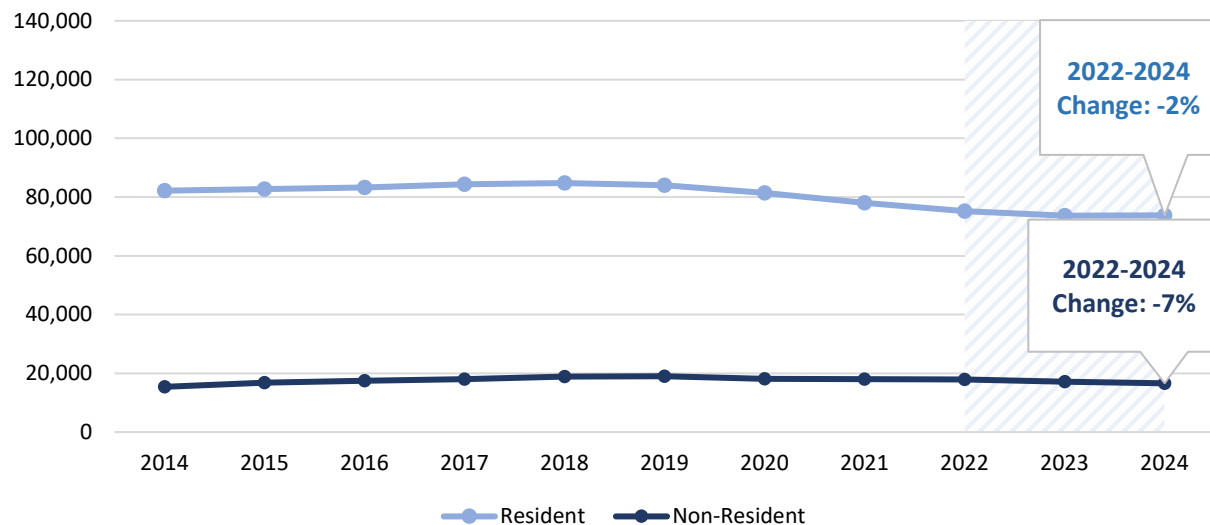
State residents comprise 84% of Washington's public postsecondary students. There are 94,570 residents enrolled at CTCs and nearly 74,000 at the public four-year institutions in fall 2024. Among the

community and technical colleges, enrollment during the pandemic recovery period has risen 13% for residents and dipped 4% for non-residents. This indicates that the CTC enrollment recovery after COVID-19 is largely due to the enrollment of Washington residents. Changes in fall enrollment vary less by resident status at public four-year institutions: Washington resident enrollment declined 2% while non-resident enrollment declined 7% since 2022.

Public CTC Award-Seeking Fall Enrollment
by State Resident Status and Year

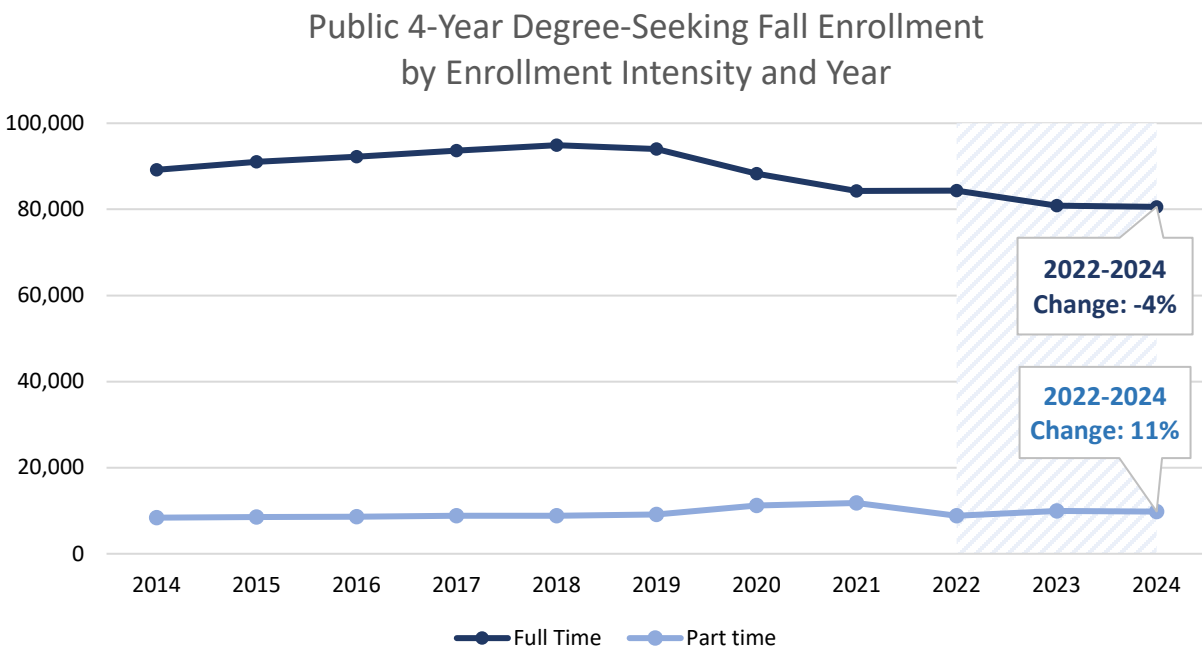
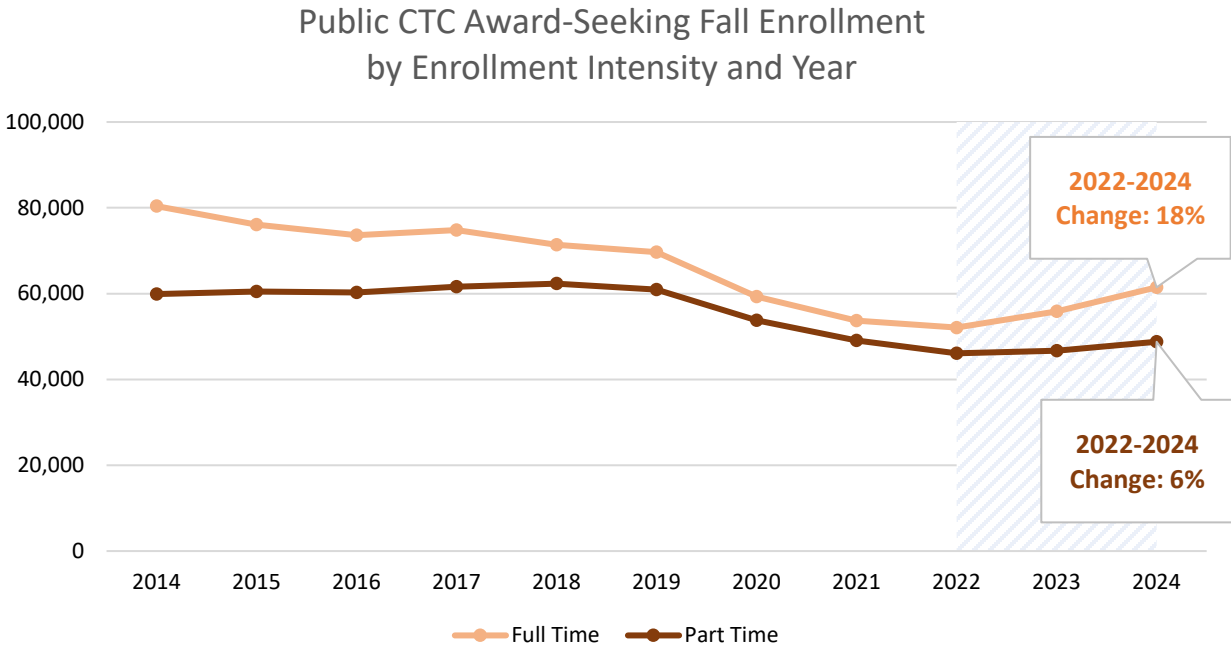


Public 4-Year Degree-Seeking Fall Enrollment
by State Resident Status and Year



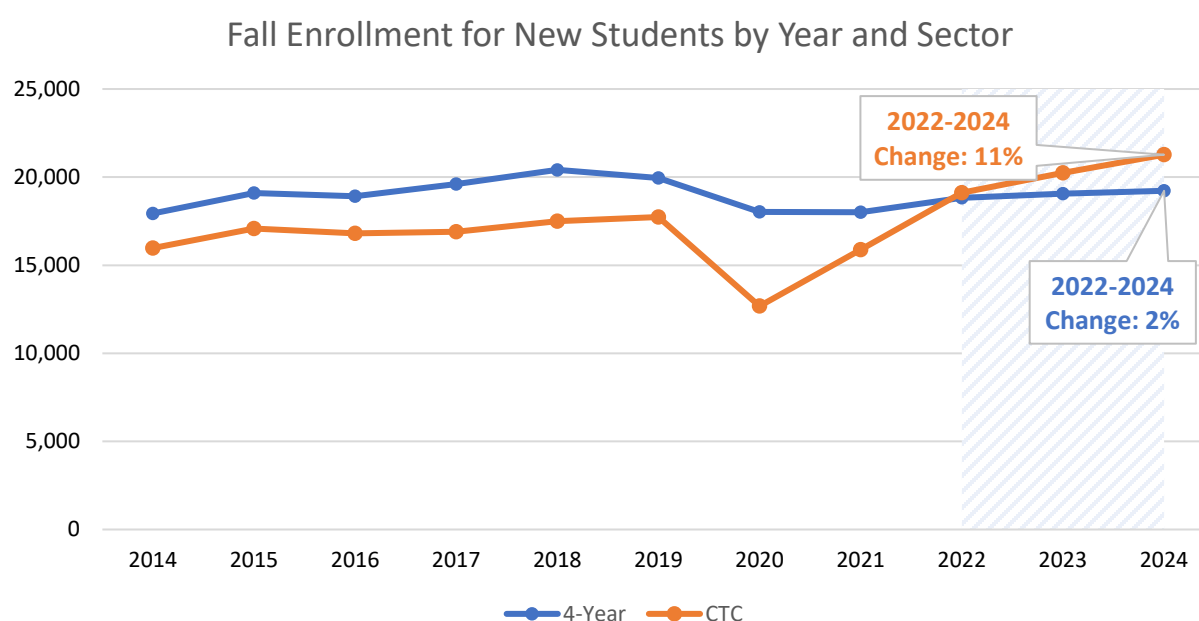
Enrollment by Student Enrollment Intensity

Overall enrollment by student enrollment intensity has remained consistent: As in previous years, roughly 71% of all public postsecondary students are enrolled full-time rather than part-time for fall 2024. Full-time enrollment at public four-year institutions has declined 4% in the pandemic recovery period while it has increased 18% at community and technical colleges. Since 2022, part-time enrollment has risen in both sectors but more so at four-year institutions (11% versus 6%). The number of part-time four-year undergraduates currently exceeds pre-pandemic levels by over 700 students.



Enrollment for New Students⁵

New student enrollment appears to have recovered from the pandemic such that 2024 CTC enrollment of new students exceeds that of each year for the past decade. Additionally, four-year enrollment is only about 700 new undergraduates shy of the pre-pandemic headcount. Since 2022, gains at the four-year institutions have been more modest than at community and technical colleges (2% versus 11%). Recent enrollment gains at the CTCs are particularly notable given the sharp decline from 17,741 new students in fall 2019 to 12,676 in fall 2020 during the height of the pandemic. In fall 2020, new students comprised only 11% of all CTC students enrolled but rose to 19% in 2022 and has remained about one-fifth of the total CTC enrollment since then. New four-year students only dipped from 19% of the total enrollment in 2019 to 18% in 2020 before returning to 19% in 2021. New students comprised 20% of all four-year students in 2022, then 21% in both 2023 and 2024.

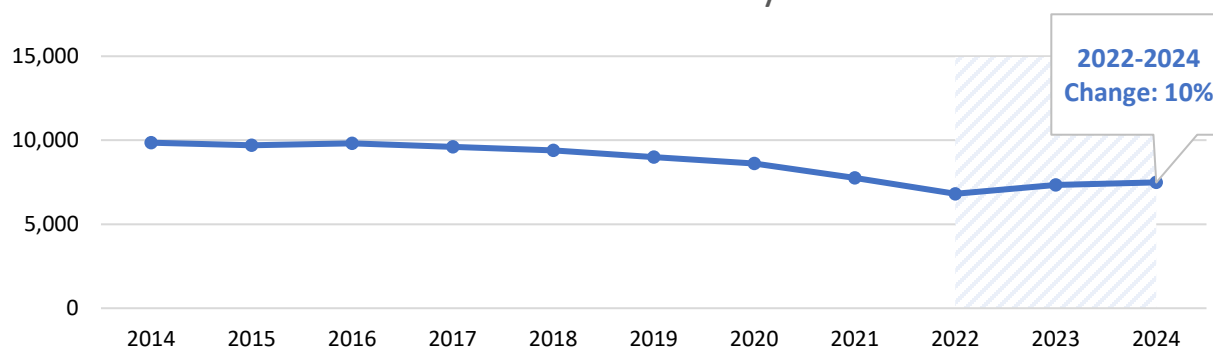


Enrollment for Transfer Students

Transfer student enrollment at public four-year institutions was on the decline before COVID-19, but the trend has changed direction since the start of the pandemic recovery period: Enrollment of transfer students has increased 10% since 2022. Historically, roughly one in ten undergraduates at Washington's public four-year institutions was a transfer student. In 2022, however, only 7% of the total four-year enrollment was comprised of students who had transferred that fall. As of fall 2024, transfer students were 8% of undergraduates at four-year institutions.

⁵ New CTC students are defined as those who have not previously attended a community or technical college in Washington; students who newly enroll at a given CTC are not classified as new students if they have attended another CTC in the past. New students at four-year institutions are beginning their first bachelor's degree programs "following completion of high school or an equivalent avenue of academic preparation;" this includes students who participated in high school dual enrollment and excludes transfer students. Sources: www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/data-services/data-warehouse/student.pdf and https://erdc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/PCHEES_Data_Submission_Guide.pdf

Public 4-Year Degree-Seeking Fall Enrollment for Transfer Students by Year



Conclusion

Washington's community and technical college system experienced more substantial enrollment declines during the pandemic than the state's four-year institutions. After the pandemic recovery period began in the 2022-2023 academic year, overall enrollment has notably improved at the CTCs and been relatively steady at their four-year counterparts. Consistent with historical trends, students who do not receive need-based aid, female students, students age 24 and younger, state residents, and full-time students comprise the majority of public postsecondary students.

There are nuances to enrollment trends across sectors, and enrollment by financial aid status and race/ethnicity are key examples of that. Enrollment of need-based aid recipients has most drastically risen at the CTCs, and the number of these students now almost reaches that of students without need-based aid. Expanded financial aid via the Washington College Grant seems to be contributing to the uptick of students receiving need-based aid. CTC enrollment recovery is largely due to an influx of resident enrollment, which supports the idea that WCG increases access to postsecondary enrollment.

In terms of enrollment by race/ethnicity, the percent change during the pandemic recovery period is markedly different across sectors and by group. Except for American Indian/Alaska Native students, there were larger enrollment increases for all racial/ethnic groups at the CTCs than the four-years. For example, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander student enrollment rose 1% at CTCs but declined 53% at four-year institutions. White students comprise the largest share of postsecondary students, though their enrollment since 2022 has increased 8% at the CTCs and decreased 5% at the four-year institutions.

During the pandemic recovery period, new student enrollment at community and technical colleges has surpassed new student enrollment at four-year institutions. This has not been the case historically. Moreover, growth within the CTC system will ultimately affect transfer enrollment. Since 2022, enrollment of transfer students has increased 10% at four-year institutions.

Trends in Washington's public postsecondary enrollment appear relatively promising in the pandemic recovery period. Differences by sectors and student groups are important to consider in the development of policy and practice. Enrollment changes at the community and technical colleges and four-year institutions highlight where initiatives may be needed to bolster postsecondary outreach, student support, and completion efforts.