

# COVID-19 TRANSFER, MOBILITY, AND PROGRESS

*Final Look Spring 2021 Report*



National Student Clearinghouse™  
Research Center™

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## COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress

### Final Look Spring 2021 Report

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports on the shifting transfer landscape during COVID-19 in a rapid response report series titled *COVID-19 TRANSFER, MOBILITY, AND PROGRESS*. We issue two reports per academic term, starting with a first look of the term, followed by the end of term update.

As the fourth in the series, this edition is an end-of-term report for spring 2021. It focuses on year-over-year changes within a fixed panel of institutions that represent 94 percent of the Clearinghouse universe of institutions and 11.3 million undergraduate students (including 737,000 transfer students) reported as of April 22. In summer 2021, we will provide a more complete picture of transfer and mobility trends based on the full academic year's data.

With support from Ascendium Education Group and the ECMC Foundation, a total of nine rapid response transfer updates and special reports will be published through summer 2022.

### BACKGROUND – Transfer Pathways Amidst a Pandemic

As the effects of the pandemic continue to impact postsecondary institutions into late spring 2021, this research series attempts to quantify how the transfer and enrollment gaps by student characteristics that existed before the pandemic continue to be affected by these disruptions.

Even before the pandemic, many college students intending to transfer struggled to manage the complexities of the transfer process, particularly those in underrepresented groups. As prior research from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows, [Black and Latinx students](#) are significantly less likely than their Asian and White peers to transfer from a two-year to a four-year college. [Lower income students](#) beginning at a community college also transfer at much lower rates than higher income students, and subsequently graduate with a bachelor's degree at only half the rate of their higher income counterparts.

The general dampening of student mobility during the pandemic that we first reported last fall appears to continue into this spring. However, upward transfers from two-year to four-year institutions have weathered the effects of the pandemic better than all other pathways. This trend may be a reflection of ongoing efforts to [streamline the transfer process](#) during the pandemic in order to reduce inequities in access to bachelor's degrees. Our data shows, however, that not all student groups have been able to leverage these opportunities.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Transfer enrollment has declined nearly 10 percent this spring, the largest year-over-year decline observed during the pandemic. Non-transfer enrollment also declined but not as steeply (-6.5%).
- Upward transfer from two-year to four-year institutions was the only mobility pathway to increase, up 1.5 percent this spring after a 5.5 percent decline last spring. Steep declines were observed for reverse transfer (-18%) and lateral transfer (-12.6%).
- Traditional college-age students (18- to 24-year-olds) were far less mobile than adult students, having dropped 13.6 percent in transfer enrollment compared to a 2.5 percent drop for those 30 and older.
- Transfer enrollment at community colleges continues to be the hardest hit during the pandemic, declining 16.3 percent, while public four-year colleges have been least affected among all sectors (-1.5%).

- Specifically, White, Black, Latinx, and Asian transfer students all fared better at public four-year colleges but worsened at community colleges, compared to their pre-pandemic transfer trends. At public four-year colleges, Latinx and Asian transfer students grew nearly 2 percent while White and Black transfer students declined 6.2 percent and 2.8 percent, respectively, though their declines were smaller than pre-pandemic declines. At community colleges, however, transfer enrollment for all four racial/ethnic groups declined by double digits this spring.

## Method in Brief

This report series quantifies the impact of the pandemic on the various transfer pathways for undergraduate students through three different lenses: First, by comparing the number of students whose enrollment in spring 2021 occurs at a different institution from their previous enrollment, whether in fall 2020 or before (transfer enrollment) to the numbers of similar students in spring 2020 (pre-pandemic baselines); second, by comparing the percent change in these numbers between spring 2020 and spring 2021 to the change occurring between 2019 and 2020 (pre-pandemic baseline trend); and third, by comparing transfer students as a share of all undergraduate students enrolled (transfer-in rate) between spring 2020 and spring 2021. Because no significant differences in enrollment status changes in January through May were observed between 2020 and the same period in 2018 and 2019 (see [COVID-19 Supplement](#) to the spring 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates report), spring 2020 is considered to be pre-pandemic in this report.

## Transfer and Mobility Definition

We track the transfer and mobility pathways of undergraduate students who enroll in spring 2021 without prior undergraduate completion except for those who earned a prior associate degree or certificate. Transfer and mobility are defined as any change in a student's enrolled institution irrespective of the timing, direction, or location of the move, and regardless of whether any course credits were transferred from one institution to another. Transfer and mobility are tracked across institutions, sectors, and states.

## Three Student Groups

**Continuing students:** Students who continued enrollment from fall 2020, with or without having earned an associate degree or certificate. These students comprise 86.2 percent of spring 2021 undergraduates, down from 86.9 percent last spring.

**Returning students:** Students who had a stop-out without undergraduate completion and re-enrolled in the current term. These students have no enrollment records in the preceding term and at least one enrollment at some point before that term. This group represents 8.2 percent of spring 2021 undergraduates, up from 7.8 percent last spring.

**First-time students:** Students with no previous college enrollment or completion records unless the previous record is prior to when they turn age 18 or they graduate from high school. These students make up 5.6 percent of spring 2021 undergraduates, up from 5.2 percent last spring.

Our analysis of student mobility focuses on continuing and returning students, who are further distinguished between transfers and non-transfers (see the Methodological notes).

## MAIN FINDINGS

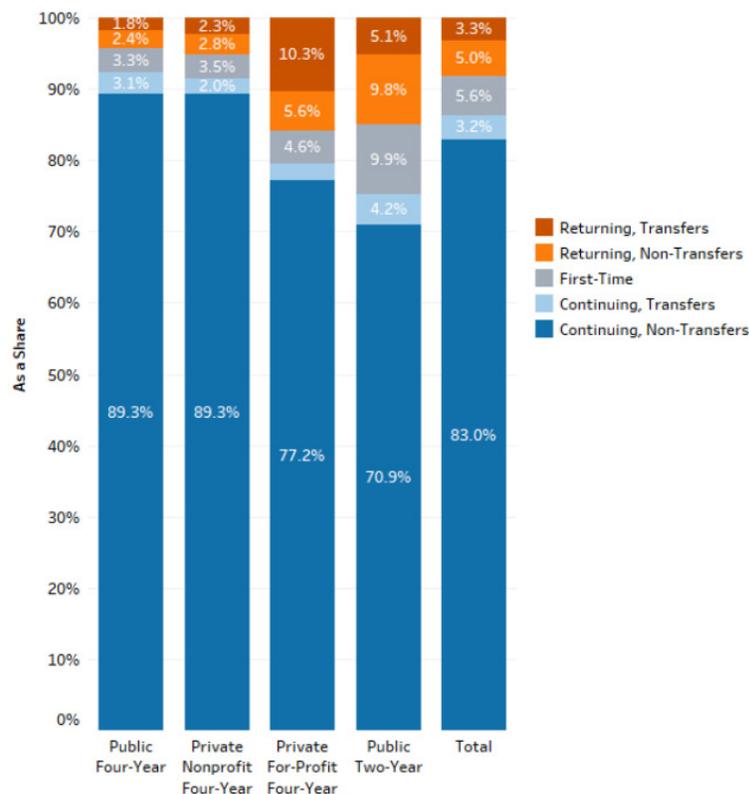
### 1. Transfer enrollment fell nearly 10 percent from a year ago, the largest decline recorded in the pandemic.

With nearly all colleges having submitted their spring 2021 enrollment, we found transfer enrollment is down 9.6 percent from a year ago, the steepest decline since the pandemic began. Non-transfer enrollment also declined but not as steeply (-6.5%). The gap between the declines in transfer and non-transfer enrollment were much more pronounced last fall (-7.8% and -2.3%, respectively). Transfers continuing from the previous fall fell precipitously, down 12.6 percent this spring, reflecting the ripple effect of large enrollment shortfalls in fall 2020 on the number of students who continue enrollment in spring 2021.

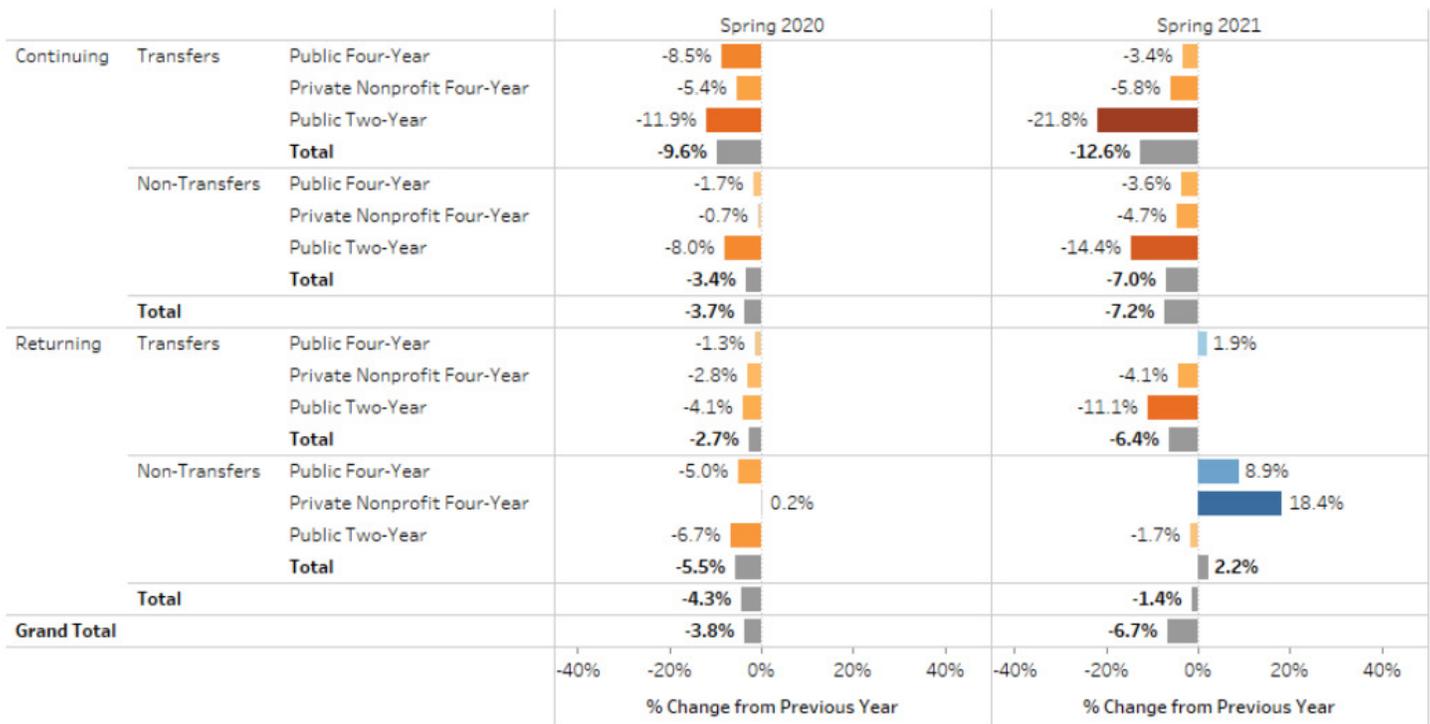
Though continuing students dropped the most, falling 7.2 percent from the previous spring, they still make up the vast majority of the spring 2021 undergraduate student body (86.2%), while returning and freshmen students make up a small share (8.2% and 5.6%, respectively; see **Figure 1**).

As shown in **Figure 2**, transfer enrollment at community colleges fell considerably this spring relative to pre-pandemic declines for both continuing (-21.8% vs. -11.9%) and returning students (-11.1% vs. -4.1%). In contrast, returning transfers to public four-year institutions increased 1.9 percent this spring, the only group to avoid declines. Both continuing and returning transfer enrollments trended worse than their non-transfer counterparts due to significant drops in community college transfers (Figure 2). Particularly, returning transfer students fell by 6.4 percent, more than twice the pre-pandemic rate of decline (-2.7%), while their non-transfer peers reversed their pre-pandemic trend (from -5.5% last spring to +2.2% this spring).

**Figure 1. Spring 2021 Undergraduates at a Glance**



**Figure 2. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Student Group and Institution Sector**



### Spring 2021 and Fall 2020 Enrollment Patterns Compared

- Large year-over-year declines occurred this spring in the number of students continuing enrollment from fall term (-7.2%), primarily due to the fall 2020 enrollment shortfalls. In contrast, former students returning this spring after a stop-out decreased only slightly from a year ago (-1.4%). This was an improvement from the fall, when far fewer former students re-enrolled compared with the preceding fall (-8.4%).
- Far fewer students started college in the spring than in the fall. First-time students comprised 5.6 percent of undergraduate enrollment this spring vs. 17 percent last fall. Freshman enrollment this spring dropped 0.9 percent from a year ago, reversing the pre-pandemic gain (+0.9%). There is little evidence to support predictions that, due to pandemic-related disruptions, freshmen who would have started last fall took a gap semester to start this spring instead.
- While upward transfer from two-year to four-year institutions was the most prevalent transfer pathway last fall, accounting for 49.5 percent of all transfer students (vs. 34.2% this spring), lateral transfer—particularly between two-year institutions—was the most prevalent in the spring (44.6%, vs. 38% in fall 2020). These patterns are unchanged from previous years.
- Black transfer enrollment fell most sharply in every sector last fall. This spring, White, Black, Latinx, and Asian transfer enrollments fell by double digits at community colleges.

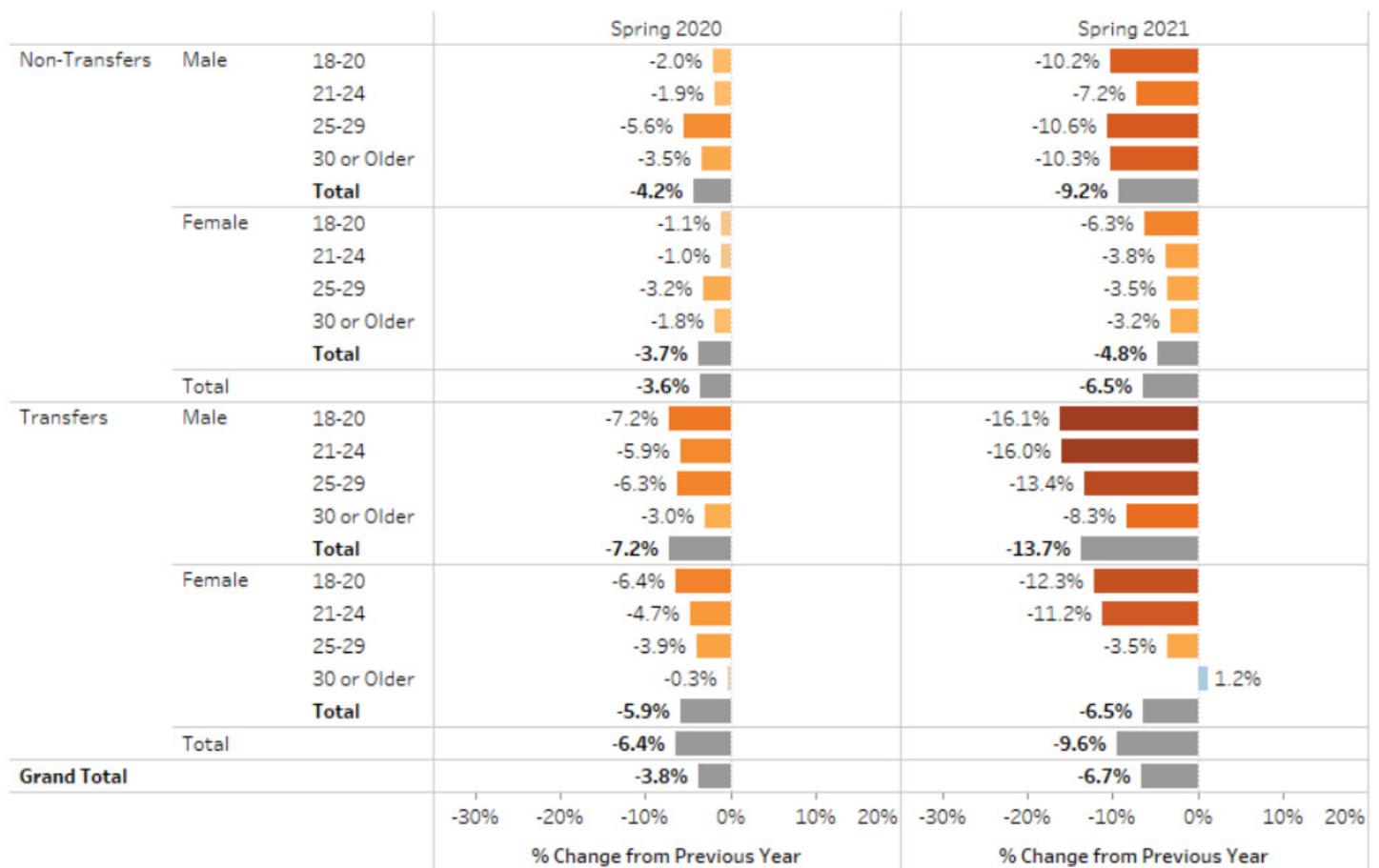
Male transfer students continued to drop during the pandemic, regardless of age group. Overall, transfer enrollments among men fell at double the rate of women (-13.7% and -6.5%, respectively) after dropping at similar rates last spring (-7.2% and -5.9%, respectively; see **Figure 3**). The same patterns of decline among men relative to women hold for non-transfer students as well.

Transfer enrollment fell much more steeply among traditional college-age students than their older counterparts (-13.6% for 18- to 24-year-olds, compared to -2.5% for those 30 and older). Figure 3 illustrates that among all age and gender categories, only women over 30 showed an increase (1.2%). This is mostly attributable to those returning after a stop-out, particularly at public four-year colleges and community colleges (+10.1%, +3.9%, respectively, not shown in the figure).

**2. All transfer pathways continue to fall except for upward transfer, where transfer students grew 1.5 percent from last spring. Reverse transfer enrollment declined by 18 percent and lateral transfer enrollment by 12.6 percent.**

Upward transfer continues to be the only transfer pathway to increase during the pandemic (+1.5%), reversing the pre-pandemic decline (-5.5%; see **Figure 4**). Upward transfer now comprises 34.2 percent of all transfer pathways, up 3.7 percentage points from the previous year (**Figure 5**). Continuing students lead the increase in upward transfers, accounting for 78.2 percent of the increase from the year prior. In fact, upward transfers for continuing students were declining at 9 percent year over year before reversing course this spring. For returning students, upward transfer generally stayed the same from the previous year (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Gender and Age Group**

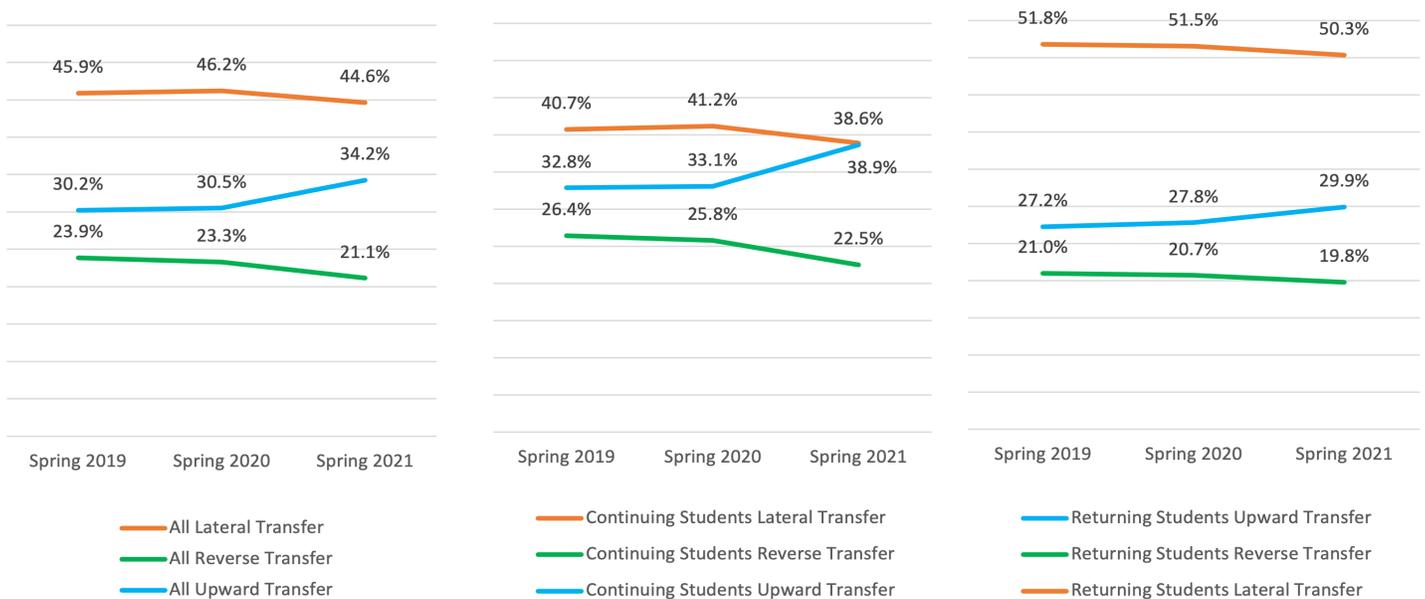


**Figure 4. Transfer and Mobility Overall: Spring 2020 and Spring 2021**



Note: Click [here](#) for the chart with full interactivity

**Figure 5. Transfer Pathways As a Share of All Transfers by Student Group: Spring 2019 - Spring 2021**



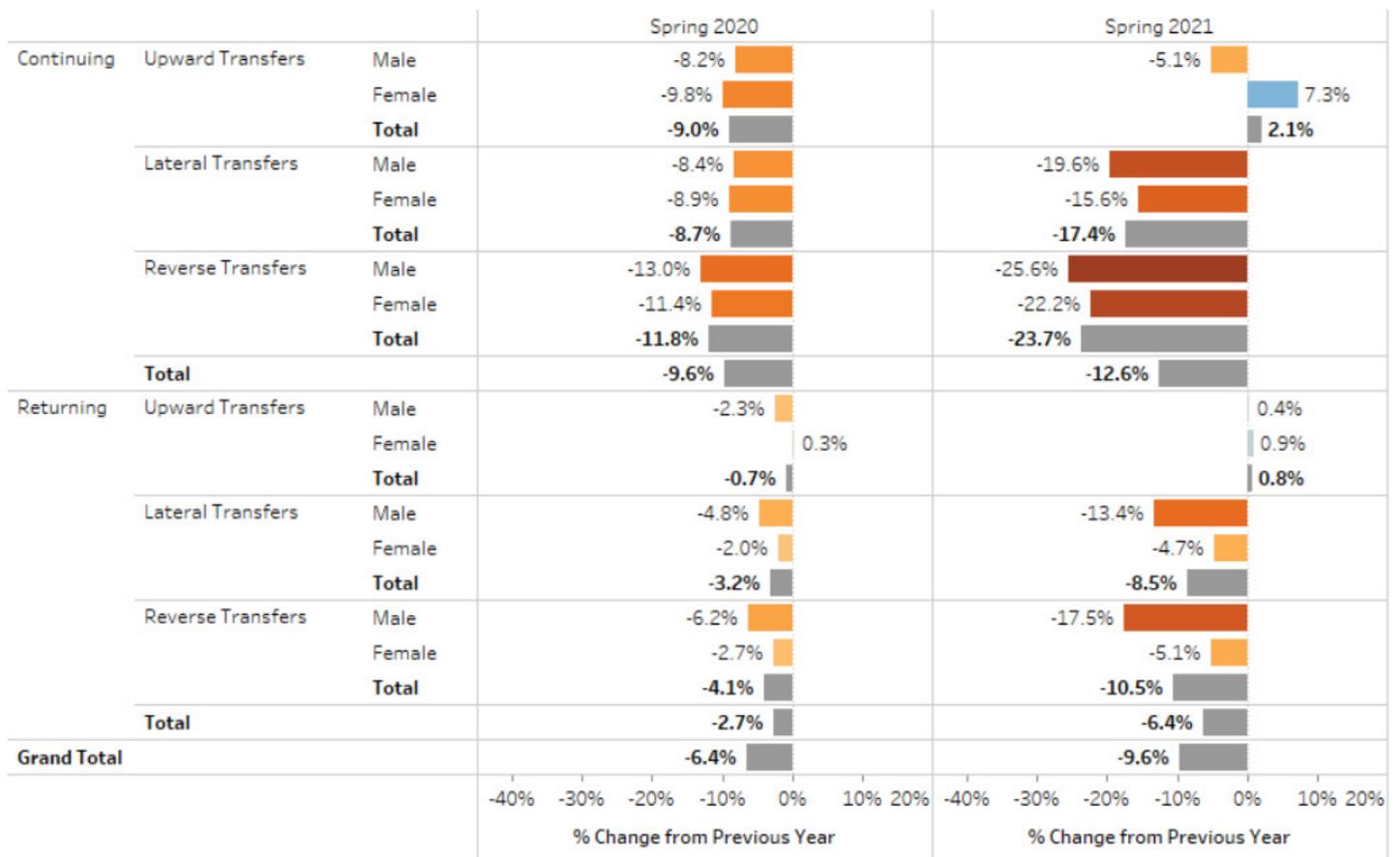
In the previous spring, upward transfer enrollment for women continuing from the fall was declining slightly more than for men (-9.8% vs. -8.2%). This spring, however, the increase in upward transfers is entirely due to the increase among continuing female students (+7.3%; see **Figure 6**). Continuing male upward transfers dropped 5.1 percent. Upward transfers overall (including returning students) also increased for traditional college-aged students (+7.6%), students aged 30 and over (+3.7%), Latinx (+3.2%), and Asian students (+5.8%) while declining for men (-2.8%), Black (-1.2%), and White (-1.1%) students.

Most upward transfer students transferred without earning an associate degree (62.8%), a trend that grew 2 percent after falling 7.2 percent in the year prior, driven by a 3.5 percent increase among continuing students. Returning students who transferred upward without a prior associate degree, however, remained stable (-0.2%), while those having previously earned their associate degree increased in their upward mobility during the pandemic (2.1%). Finally, those transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution within the same state also reversed course during the pandemic, having increased this spring by 1.2 percent following a decline of 7.8 percent last year (**Figure 7**).

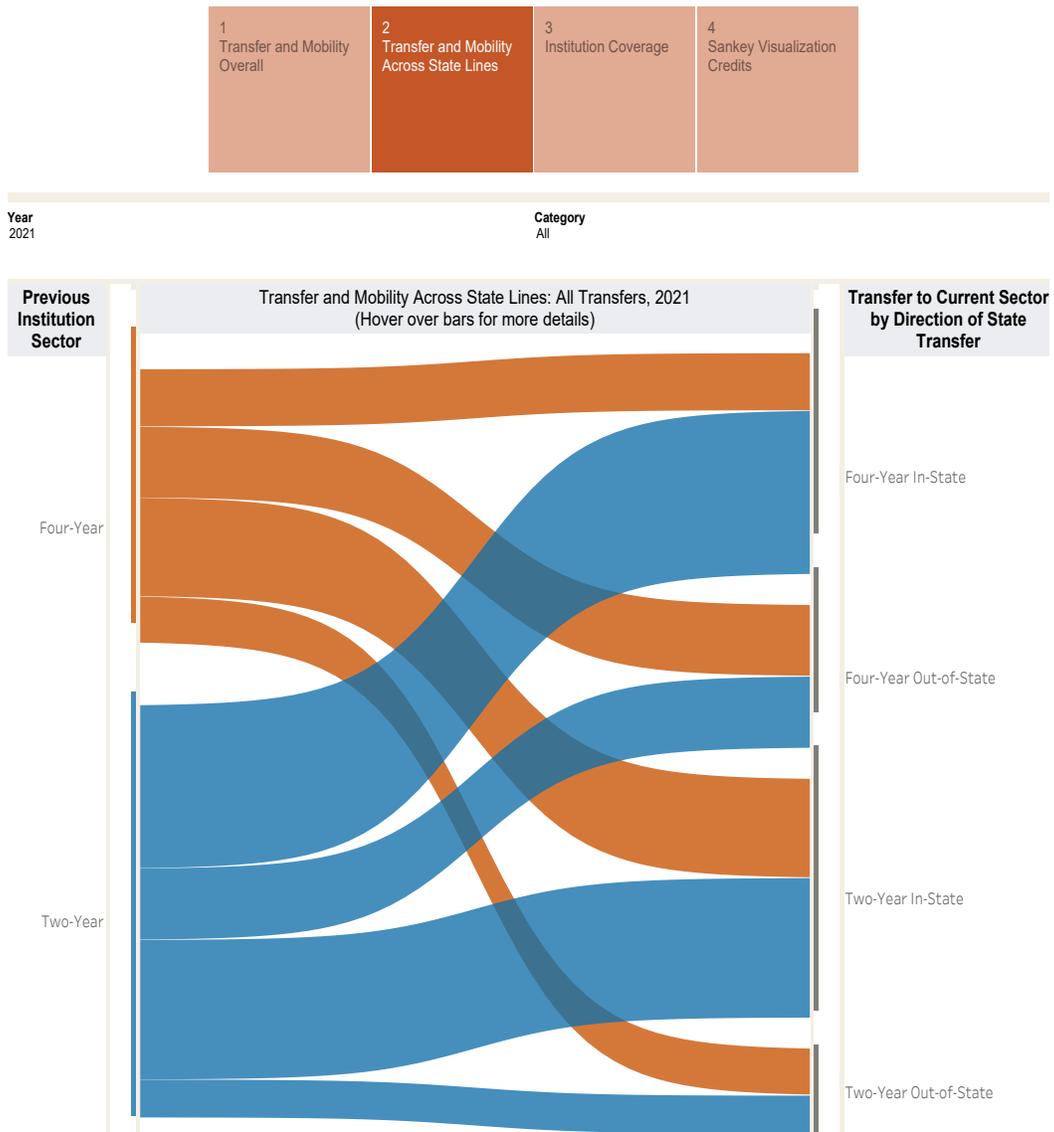
Those transferring laterally between two-year or between four-year institutions showed accelerated declines across all student groups defined by race and ethnicity, age, or gender. Declines were steeper among continuing students (-17.4% vs. -8.5% in returning students; see Figure 6). Latinx students returning after a stop-out, the only group to see lateral transfer growth before the pandemic, also declined.

Among reverse transfer students, returning students 30 or older were the only group to not decline during the pandemic, having grown slightly by 0.2 percent following a decline of 1.3 percent last spring. This was the largest age category, making up 37 percent of the returning reverse transfer enrollment total.

**Figure 6. Enrollment Change in Transfer Pathways by Student Group and Gender**



**Figure 7. Transfer and Mobility Crossing State Lines: Spring 2020 and Spring 2021**



Note: Click [here](#) for the chart with full interactivity.

### 3. Transfer enrollment at community colleges continues to be the hardest hit by the pandemic, regardless of student group, gender, race and ethnicity, or age, while public four-year institutions remain the least affected among all sectors.

Overall transfer enrollment declined 16.3 percent at community colleges, doubling the drop from the previous year (-8%), and the decline among non-transfers at community colleges was also steep (13%). The reverse is true for public four-year institutions, where transfer enrollment fell much less than before the pandemic (-1.5% vs. -6%), and by less than half the rate of decline among non-transfers (-1.5% vs. -3.3%), as shown in **Figure 8**.

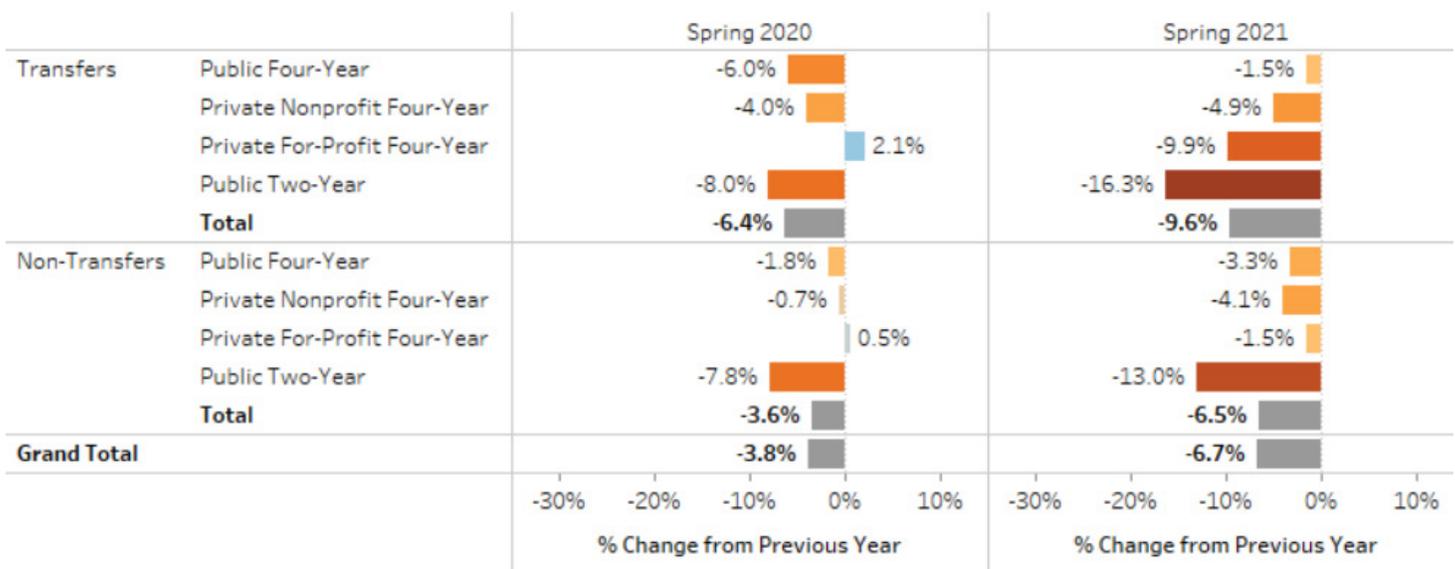
At community colleges, both transfer and non-transfer enrollments dropped double digits regardless of student age, gender, or race and ethnicity, except for adults ages 30 and older (-5.9%, not shown in figures). The number of women 30 and older who transfer into a community college showed no change over last spring, the only group in this sector to improve over their pre-pandemic trend (-1.4%). The steepest transfer enrollment drops in community colleges were for traditional college-aged students (-22.9%), followed by men (-21.5%). For public four-year institutions, the largest transfer drops year over year were for men (-6%).

### 4. White, Black, Latinx, and Asian transfer students all fared better at public four-year colleges but worsened at community colleges, compared to their pre-pandemic transfer trends.

While transfer enrollments were already declining prior to the pandemic across all race and ethnicity categories, the pandemic pushed those declines into double digits, falling around 10 percent for White (-10.7%), Black (-10.3%), and Latinx students (-10.5%). These declines were most evident among continuing students, where transfer enrollments fell 15.2 percent for Black students, 14.2 percent for White students, and 13.4 percent for Latinx students. In fact, while continuing White student transfer enrollments were already declining at high levels prior to the pandemic, Black transfer enrollment declines nearly doubled during the pandemic (-15.2% vs. -7.8%) and Latinx transfer enrollment declines nearly tripled (-13.4% vs. -5%). The decline in Asian student transfer enrollment was comparable to their pre-pandemic decline (-5.8% vs. -5.5%, respectively).

However, racial and ethnic patterns differed between public four-year and two-year institutions (**Figure 9**). White, Black, Latinx, and Asian transfer students all fared better at public four-year colleges but worsened at community colleges, compared to their pre-pandemic transfer trends. Although White and Black student transfers declined at public four-year colleges (-6.2% and -2.8%, respectively), the rate of decline was smaller compared to the previous year. Transfer enrollment grew during the pandemic for public four-year Latinx students, increasing 1.8 percent this year after decreasing 2.4 percent in the year prior. Asian transfer students also increased over their pre-pandemic level (+1.9% this spring vs. +0.4% last spring).

**Figure 8. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Institution Sector**

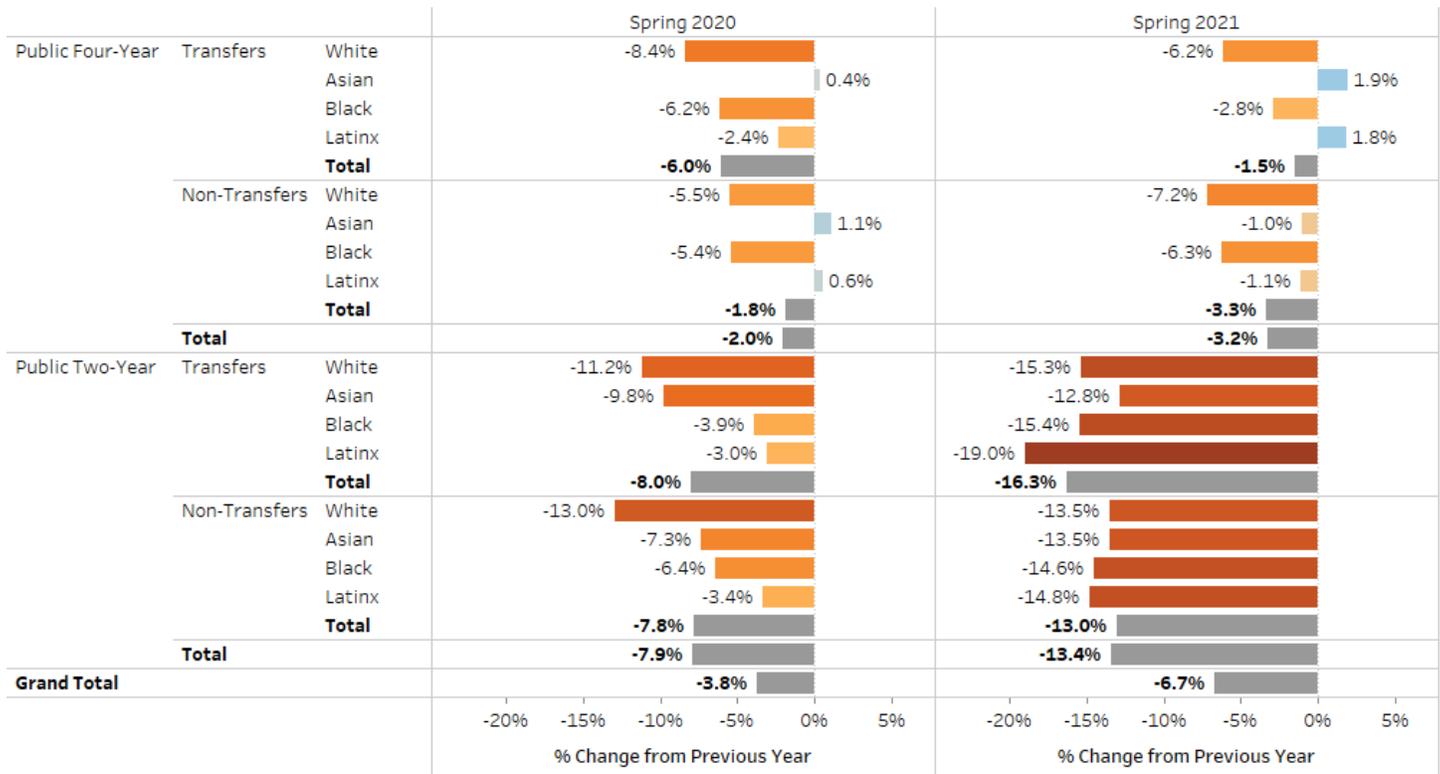


In the public two-year sector, transfer enrollment declined sharply this year across all four racial and ethnic groups in focus, although the drops were most severe for Black and Latinx students compared to pre-pandemic levels. As Figure 9 shows, Black transfer students at community colleges fell by almost four times their rate last spring (-15.4% vs. -3.9%), and their Latinx peers decreased by over six times the pre-pandemic decline (-19% vs. -3%).

The transfer-in rate is a measure of the prevalence of transfer-in students among all undergraduates enrolled. This differs from the year-over-year rate of change in transfer student counts, which is irrespective of the change in overall undergraduate enrollment. Nationally, transfer-in rates dropped slightly across all four races and ethnicities in focus, with the Black transfer-in rate having lost ground after increasing last spring (Figure 10a).

These national declines were driven by relatively larger decreases in the transfer-in rate at community colleges for all groups except Asian students, the only group whose rate this spring increased in this sector following a decrease last spring (Figure 10a). The transfer-in rate for White, Black, and Latinx students at community colleges all saw a 0.4 percentage-point swing from a pre-pandemic increase to a decrease this year, while Asian students saw a 0.4 percentage-point swing in the opposite direction. The Latinx student transfer rate at community colleges declined the most of any group (-0.4 percentage points).

**Figure 9. Enrollment Change by Institution Sector, Transfer Status, and Race/Ethnicity**



Note: Due to relatively low coverage of race and ethnicity information, private institutions are not shown but included in grand total. Race and ethnicity results for this report may be over- or under-estimated due to higher levels of missing race/ethnicity data for 2021 (15.5% of students with missing race/ethnicity) compared to 2020. Use caution when interpreting the race and ethnicity results throughout the report.

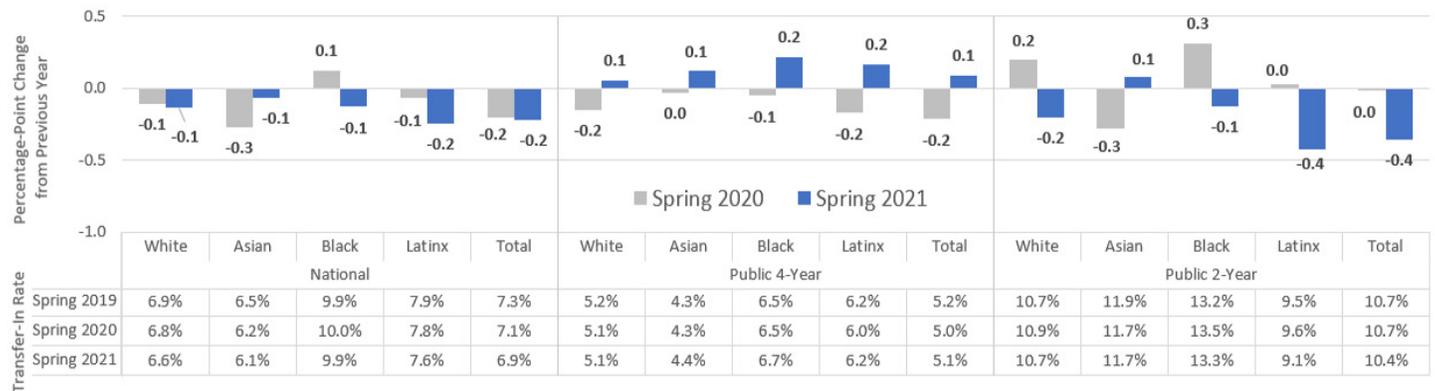
In contrast, White, Black, Latinx, and Asian students have all fared better at public four-year colleges, with their transfer-in rates having reversed pre-pandemic declines and currently growing as much as two percentage points, as is the case for Black and Latinx students. This reversal, as well as Black and Latinx students leading the growth, are particularly evident in the focused look at the upward transfer-in rates this spring (see **Figure 10b**).

Public four-year institutions continue to comprise most upward transfer enrollments (69.7%), and their share has increased from last year. Particularly, students transferring in from community colleges increased by 0.2 percentage points from last spring, as a share of total public four-year undergraduate enrollment. The larger increase for Black and Latinx transfer students combined (+0.3 percentage points) suggests that the expansion in upward transfer opportunities during the pandemic is not limited to historically over-represented students this spring.

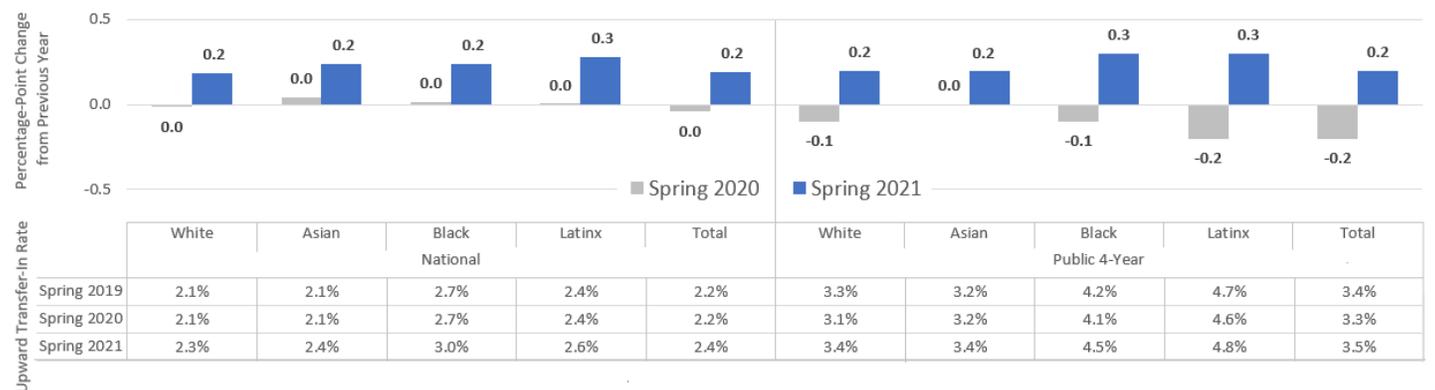
### 5. Transfer enrollment declines at primarily online institutions accelerated this spring, from a 1.1 percent drop to a 7.7 percent drop.

As **Figure 11** reveals, primarily online institutions (POIs), where more than 90 percent of students enrolled exclusively online before the pandemic, saw a small overall enrollment decline of 1.2 percent this spring, compared to a small increase in the year prior (1.6%). This decline was driven by a sharp decline in transfer students (-7.7%), while non-transfer students remained unchanged (-0.1%). Returning student transfers, who make up the vast majority of transfer enrollment at POIs (82.6%) slid 5.3 percent this spring, after little change in the previous spring (-0.3%). A large drop in returning female transfers (-7.7%) accounted for nearly all of this decline; their male counterparts declined less than half a percent.

**Figure 10a. Change in Overall Transfer-In Rate by Race and Ethnicity for Public Institutions**

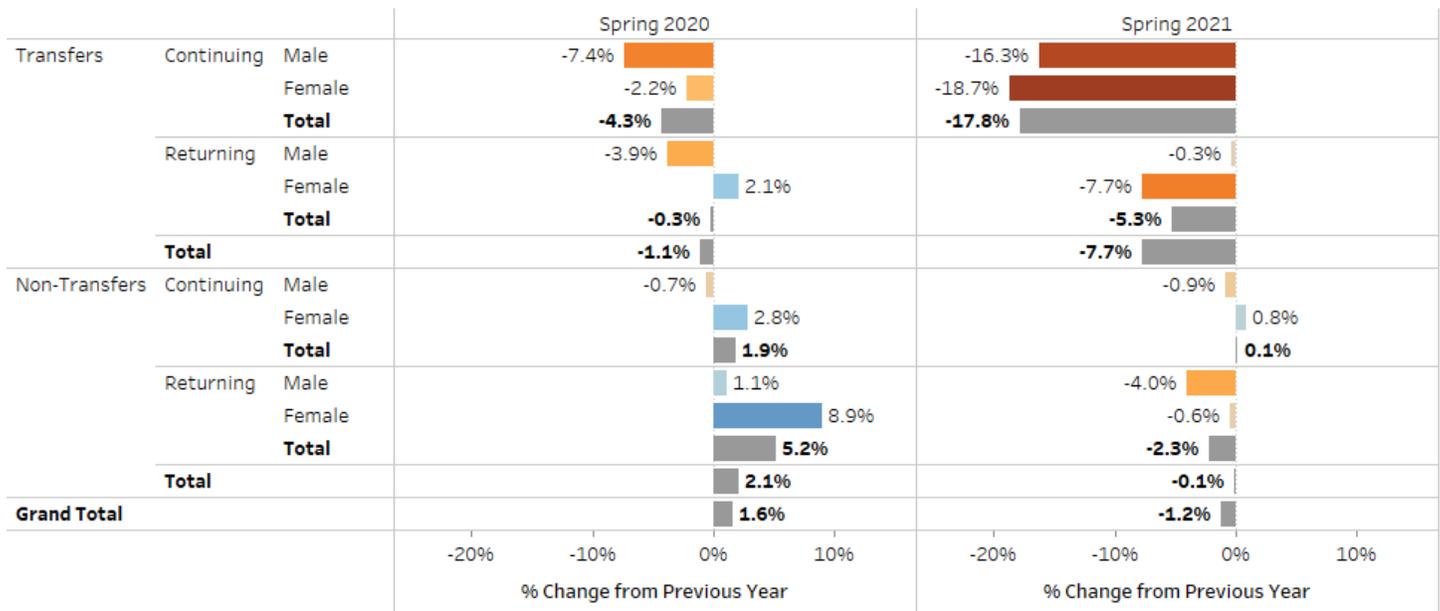


**Figure 10b. Change in Upward Transfer-In Rate by Race and Ethnicity for Public Four-Year Institutions**



Note: Due to relatively low coverage of race and ethnicity information, private institutions are not shown but included in grand total. Race and ethnicity results for this report may be over- or under-estimated due to higher levels of missing race/ethnicity data for 2021 (15.5% of students with missing race/ethnicity) compared to 2020. Use caution when interpreting the race and ethnicity results throughout the report.

**Figure 11. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments at Primarily Online Institutions by Student Group and Gender**



Note: Due to small continuing transfer student numbers at primarily online institutions, use caution when interpreting the gender results for this group of students.

## SUMMARY

This report presents the transfer enrollment patterns for spring 2021, with 94 percent of institutions reporting as of April 22. This semester marks the steepest year-over-year decline in overall transfer enrollment since the pandemic began, with a 10 percent drop over last spring in the number of students who changed institutions from their most recent prior enrollment. Non-transfer enrollment also declined but not as steeply (-6.5%).

The decline in transfer enrollment occurred mostly among continuing students, whose prior enrollment was last fall (-12.6%), highlighting the ongoing ripple effect of the pandemic-induced fall 2020 enrollment declines. Transfer students returning this spring after a stop-out declined by about half the rate of their counterparts who continued enrollment from last fall (-6.4%). The declines in both of these groups were concentrated in community colleges, where continuing and returning transfers declined by 21.8 and 11.1 percent, respectively, considerably greater than their pre-pandemic losses (-11.9% and -4.1%, respectively) and compared to their non-transfer peers (-14.4% and -1.7%, respectively).

Community colleges suffered significant transfer and non-transfer enrollment losses in the pandemic (-16.3% and -13%, respectively). These transfer declines were magnified by the pandemic for all student groups defined by age, gender, or race and ethnicity. Notably, traditional college-age transfer students declined far more than their older counterparts (-22.9% for age 18-24 versus -5.9% for age 30 and older).

Transfer enrollment at public four-year colleges also declined, but at a slower rate than their pre-pandemic decline (-1.5% versus -6%). White, Black, Latinx, and Asian transfer students all fared better at public four-year colleges, compared to their pre-pandemic transfer trends. Latinx and Asian transfer students grew nearly 2 percent while White and Black transfer students declined 6.2 percent and 2.8 percent, respectively, though their rate of decline was less than before the pandemic. At community colleges, however, transfer enrollment for all four racial/ethnic groups declined by double digits this spring. It is noteworthy that Latinx transfer students saw the largest percentage point swing of any racial/ethnic category in the public four-year sector (shifting from -2.4% last spring to +1.8% this spring).

The general dampening of student mobility during the pandemic has largely persisted into the spring, with both reverse and lateral transfer falling sharply, more than double their pre-pandemic rates of decline (-18% and -12.6%, respectively).

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But due to the pandemic-led upward transfer growth (+1.5%), spring transfer enrollment declines began to decelerate at public four-year colleges this year.

However, this increase in upward transfer was not shared by all student groups, with Black and White men experiencing declines while traditional college-age students, adults 30 and older, women, as well as Latinx and Asian students, saw growth. Continuing students, not returning students, increasingly took upward transfer pathways this spring. Also, those transferring upward without an associate degree increased more than students who already earned an associate degree (+2% vs. +0.8%). All these transfer patterns are attributable to the pandemic, and are expected to continue.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The *Transfer, Mobility, and Progress* series is designed to track the impact of COVID-19 on postsecondary transfer and mobility, using the latest data available and the historical data from the two most recent years (2019 and 2020) as pre-pandemic baselines. It updates transfer data dashboards bimonthly, disaggregated by various subgroups of students, programs, institutions, states, or regions.

This spring 2021 final report shows transfer pathways across 94 percent of the Clearinghouse universe of institutions reported as of April 22, 2021. It focuses on year-over-year percent changes in enrollment based on the same institutions' spring 2020 and spring 2019 reporting as of April 22 each year.

Report	Spring Term Begin Date	Submission Window	Institutional Coverage
Spring #1	1/1 – 3/31	1/1 – 2/25	73.7%
Spring #2	1/1 – 3/31	1/1 – 4/22	93.7%

Note: Coverage rates are calculated based on spring 2020 data.

## NATIONAL COVERAGE OF THE DATA

Clearinghouse data track enrollments nationally and are not limited by institutional and state boundaries. As of fall 2019, institutions actively submitting enrollment data to the Clearinghouse account for 97 percent of all enrollments at Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. Since Clearinghouse data is comprised of student-level data, researchers can use it to link concurrent as well as consecutive enrollments of individual students at multiple institutions. Therefore, it presents a unique opportunity to follow students' individual transfer patterns over their whole postsecondary experience.

Unlike previous Transfer and Mobility reports, where enrollment rates are weighted by data coverage rates, the COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress series focuses on unweighted data. This is because the emphasis of this series is on year-over-year changes in transfer patterns at the same institutions (a "fixed panel") rather than estimating the total transfer numbers.

## PRE-PANDEMIC BASELINE DEVELOPMENT

To accurately assess the impact of COVID-19 on postsecondary transfer and mobility, the analyses focused on a fixed panel of all institutions that submitted data to the Clearinghouse during the same time frame across all comparison years. We created the panel to control for year-to-year variations in institutional coverage as well as the variations in data submission dates.

To control for institutional coverage, only the institutions that submitted enrollment data in 2019, 2020, and 2021 were included in the analyses. Institutions that discontinued or only started submitting enrollments at any point within these years were excluded. To control for submission timing among these institutions, only spring term data that was submitted within the data submission window (specified in Term Definition below) in each of the three years was included. However, it is important to note that even with these controls, enrollments at some institutions in the panel

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may have been overcounted or undercounted for 2021 due to unusual file submission patterns. Our investigations suggest that such data noise is minor.

### **STUDENT POPULATION, TRANSFER DEFINITION AND DIRECTIONS OF MOBILITY**

In light of this pandemic and its mostly unpredictable consequences on the higher education world at this point, we decided to investigate a very inclusive subset of the student population to capture any possible unforeseen effects on transfer behavior due to COVID-19. As a result, some of the definitions and identification strategies differ from our standard transfer and mobility reports.

#### *Undergraduate Student Population*

This study includes all degree-seeking students who were enrolled at a Title IV, degree-granting institution in the U.S. in the spring of the applicable year, reported as of April 22. This definition also includes students who were dual enrolled prior to beginning their postsecondary career but excludes current dual enrollees. We then look at students' enrollment history to classify students into the following three subgroups: (1) first-time students, (2) continuing students and (3) returning students. Continuing and returning students were included only if they had not previously earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Students were included as either continuing or returning students if they had previously earned an associates or undergraduate certificate.

- (1) Freshmen or first-time students are those who had no enrollment records or degree/certificate awards at Title IV U.S. institutions prior to the spring of the applicable year, unless the previous enrollment record was before the student turned 18 years old or before the student graduated from high school (prior dual enrollment). Freshmen are not included in the analysis of student transfer and mobility for this report.
- (2) Continuing students are those students who had at least one valid enrollment in the last fall term prior to their spring enrollment.
- (3) Returning students are those students who returned after a stop-out and were therefore not enrolled in the last fall term prior to their spring enrollment.

#### *Transfer Definition*

We define students as transfer students in spring 2021 if they previously were enrolled at a Title IV, degree-granting institution subsequently enrolled in another Title IV, degree-granting institution in spring 2021. Note that we only consider the change of institution a student is enrolled in, regardless of whether academic credits are recognized between institutions. For more in-depth analysis of transfer patterns, we group all transfer students into two categories:

- (1) Continuing transfer students are those who had at least one valid enrollment record in the last fall term and enrolled in spring at an institution different than their last enrolled institution.
- (2) Returning transfer students are those who had previously enrolled in postsecondary education but had stopped out up until the spring term, and re-enrolled in the spring at an institution different than their last enrolled institution.
- (3) Non-transfer students are either continuing or returning students defined as above who enrolled in spring at the same institution as their last enrolled institution.

The same logic is applied to spring 2019 and 2020 to determine the pre-pandemic baselines.

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## *Directions or Pathways of Student Transfer and Mobility*

This report also investigates differences in the directions of student mobility. We categorize the following types or pathways of student mobility:

- (1) Upward transfer: Students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution, with or without first receiving an award (either a certificate or associate degree). This is also known as vertical transfer.
- (2) Reverse transfer: Student who transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution.
- (3) Lateral transfer: Students who either transfer from a two-year to a two-year institution or from a four-year to a four-year institution.

### **RACE AND ETHNICITY**

Not all institutions report race and ethnicity data to the Clearinghouse. Missing data (for institutions that do not report to the Clearinghouse) and unknown data (for students that do not report to their institution) account for an average of 22 percent of all enrollments, and an average of 18 percent of all transfer enrollments reflected in this analysis. This report only analyzes four main groups (White, Black, Latinx, and Asian students) due to higher levels of missing or unknown data for 2021. Newer student enrollment data typically has less opportunity for their race and ethnicity to have been reported by colleges. Specifically, 6 percent more transfer students are missing or unknown on race and ethnicity this spring (as of April 22) compared with the previous year; 10 percent more missing or unknown at the public four-year sector and 16 percent more at community colleges.

### **IN-STATE AND OUT-OF-STATE**

Transfers are considered in-state if both institutions (of current enrollment and previous enrollment) are located in the same state, out-of-state if they are in different states. These designations apply regardless of the student's state of residence. Transfers to or from a multi-state institution (with campuses in more than one state) are excluded from state analyses.

### **RECLASSIFICATIONS OF INSTITUTION SECTORS**

This report defines institution sectors based on the IPEDS fall 2019 Institutional Characteristics data, the most current data available at the time of the publication. Our reporting is restricted to the fixed panel of institutions, and the institution sector defined by the latest IPEDS data is applied consistently across all comparison years 2019-2021. This way we can estimate COVID-19's effects without disruptions of the sector reclassifications in between years.

For the purpose of this report, we classify primarily associate degree-granting bachelor's institutions as two-year institutions for all three comparison years regardless of when such sectoral shift occurred. Therefore, it would have no impact on year-over-year enrollment changes in the four-year or two-year college sector.

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Huie, F., Lang, R., Liu, Q., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (June 2021), *COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress, Final Look Spring 2021 Report*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.