

COVID-19 TRANSFER, MOBILITY, AND PROGRESS

First Look Spring 2021 Report



National Student Clearinghouse™
Research Center™

COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress

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

As the third in the series, the current report offers a first look into the spring 2021 student transfer patterns as of February 25. It focuses on year-over-year changes within a fixed panel of institutions representing 74 percent of the Clearinghouse universe and 8.8 million undergraduate students (including 532,000 transfer students). These preliminary results will be updated as more data are received later in the spring. In summer 2021, we will provide a fuller 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 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 turned the higher education landscape on its head, many college students intending to transfer struggled to manage the complexities of available transfer options. This task is particularly daunting for underrepresented student 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.

Virus resurgence in late 2020, coupled with its differential economic and health impacts on Black, Latinx, and Native American populations in the U.S. made navigating these transfer options even more difficult. 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 has weathered the effects of the pandemic better than all other pathways. This has positive implications for the ongoing efforts to [streamline the transfer process](#) in an attempt to increase enrollment and improve diversity amidst the pandemic.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Two months into the spring term, transfer enrollment fell 7.9 percent overall this year, with the largest drop in community colleges (-15.2%).
- The decline in transfer enrollment was 3.8 times larger than the pre-pandemic rate of decline, and non-transfer enrollment decline was 3.6 times larger.
- Upward transfer was the only transfer pathway to increase this spring over pre-pandemic levels (+3%). Both reverse and lateral transfer declined sharply (-21% and -9.2%).
- Latinx transfer enrollment currently shows the strongest growth in the public four-year sector.
- Gender disparities grew regardless of age. Male student mobility declined more than females, especially in upward transfer.
- Transfer declined for continuing students at twice the rate of returning students (-10.2% and -4.9%, respectively), reflecting a ripple effect of last fall's enrollment shortfalls.

MAIN FINDINGS

Transfer enrollment fell 7.9 percent from a year ago, 3.8 times the rate of drop last spring (-2.1%). Non-transfer students also declined sharply, 3.6 times the last year's drop (-5.4% this spring and -1.4% last spring).

Though both continuing and returning students declined at the same rate last spring (-1.4%), the pandemic seems to be affecting continuous enrollment more than re-enrollment of former students, with the number of continuing students declining 5.9 percent this spring while returning student numbers changed little (-0.4%). Transfer enrollment declines this spring are largely driven by the overall decline in continuous enrollment, which, in turn, is attributable to the combined effects of last fall's enrollment shortfalls and an increase in the fall-to-spring attrition rate during COVID-19. Little change in returning student enrollment had no mitigating impact on transfer enrollment drops this spring.

Students are less mobile this spring along all transfer pathways except for upward transfer, where three percent more students moved from two-year to four-year colleges, in contrast to a 3.1 percent drop last spring. Both reverse and lateral transfer, on the other hand, suffered steep declines, 21 percent and 9.2 percent, respectively.

Upward transfers without earning an associate degree increased 7.4 percent this spring, marking a 11.5-percentage-point swing from a decline of 4.1 percent last spring. Traditional college-age students (18-20) account for 75 percent of the growth in upward transfers after having grown 9.3 percent from last year. On the other hand, having fallen steeply from last spring (-23.4%), this age group is leading the overall transfer enrollment decline at community colleges.

Transfer declined for continuing students at twice the rate of returning students (-10.2% and -4.9%, respectively). Steep declines in continuing student transfer enrollment this spring largely reflect the ripple effect of the last fall's enrollment drops especially at community colleges. Though continuing student transfers declined at all institution types, the largest declines were observed at community colleges, with a tenfold decrease from the previous year (-20.8% versus -2%).

Returning students are also less mobile this spring, with transfer enrollment falling nearly 5 percent propelled by community college enrollment losses. Former students who returned to postsecondary education after a stop-out were more likely to re-enroll in their prior institution (61%), up 1.8 percentage points from last year.

Across racial and ethnic lines, White and Black student enrollment declines persist from the previous spring, and their declines continue to be greater than their Asian and Latinx peers. Their transfer enrollment is also falling more than Asian and Latinx students this spring. At public four-year colleges, only White transfer enrollment declined while Latinx transfer enrollment is currently showing the strongest growth.

The gender gap in transfer and mobility grew larger this spring. Although transfer was on the decline for both men and women before the pandemic (-2.8% and -1.8%, respectively), continuing and returning transfer enrollment fell more substantially for men (-13.5%) than for women (-5.9%) in all age categories.

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.

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 87.9 percent of spring 2021 undergraduates, down from 88.4 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 7.1 percent of spring 2021 undergraduates, up from 6.7 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 5.1 percent of the spring 2021 undergraduates. This number remained stable from last spring (+0.2% points).

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

1. Transfer and mobility is very limited in the spring term

Spring 2021 undergraduate students are largely comprised of students who maintained enrollment from last fall (87.9%), followed by returning students who had a stop-out (7.1%) and first-time freshmen (5.1%) as shown in **Figure 1**. The vast majority of spring 2021 undergraduate enrollments are continuing non-transfer students (84.5%). Transfer enrollment only account for 6 percent of total undergraduate enrollment this spring (including freshmen). This share has not changed over the years. It should be noted that spring transfer enrollments are small compared to the fall terms because relatively few students transfer in the middle of an academic year. (For this report, we identified 532,000 transfer students, less than half of last fall's transfer students reported two months into the term.)

As of February 25, overall undergraduate enrollment is down 5.3 percent over the same time last year before the pandemic was declared. The decline in total enrollment is larger than in the first look spring 2021 *Stay Informed* report (-4.5%) due to greater data coverage and differing exclusion criteria, namely, students without prior awards except for an associate degree or certificate being included in this report.

A notable enrollment change this spring so far is in continuing students who declined in large numbers, almost 4 times larger than last spring's decline (**Figure 2**). Though both continuing and returning students declined at equal rates last spring (-1.5%), the pandemic seems to have affected continuous enrollment more than re-enrollment of former students. The number of continuing students declined 5.9 percent this spring while returning student numbers changed even less than last spring, having slipped less than half a percent. Clearly, these data reveal a ripple effect of large enrollment shortfalls in fall 2020 on the number of students who continue enrollment in spring 2021.

Figure 1. Spring 2021 Undergraduates at a Glance

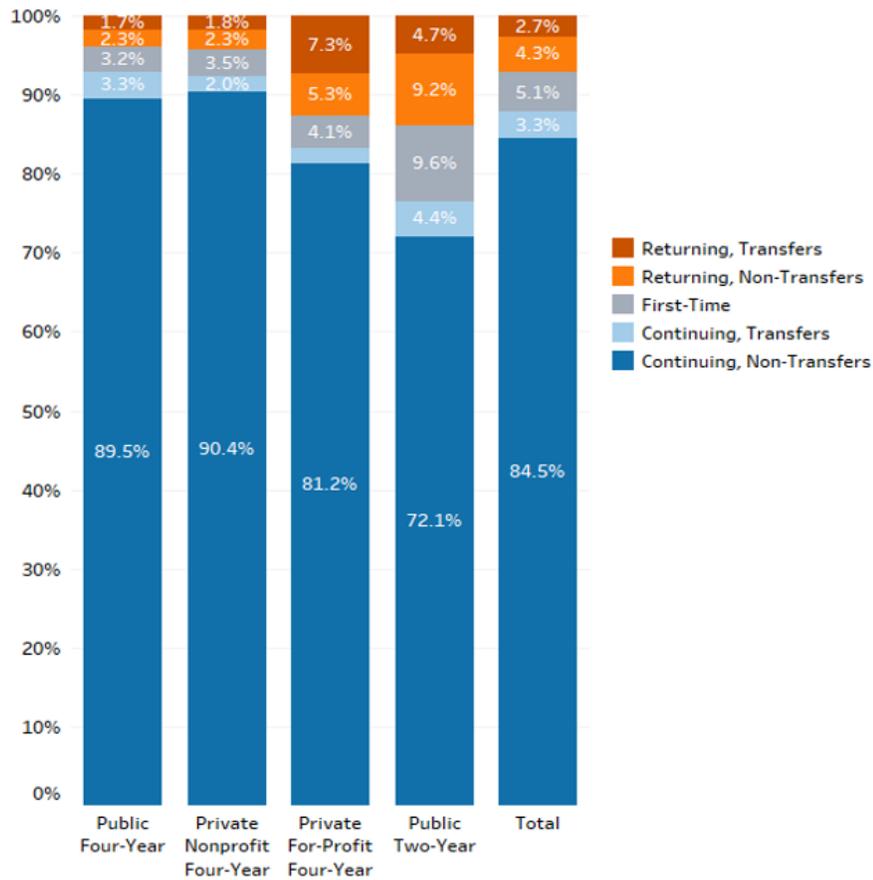
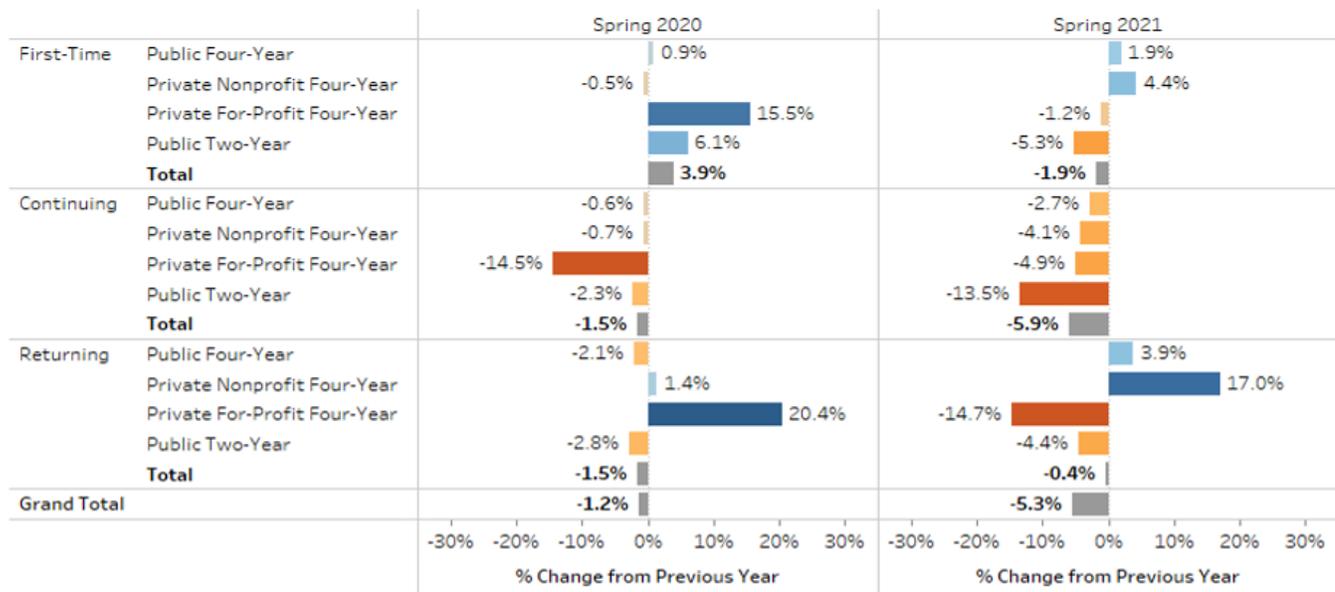


Figure 2. Change in Undergraduate Enrollment by Student Group and Institution Sector



2. Transfer enrollment is down 7.9 percent this spring, 3.8 times larger than last spring (-2.1%). Declines are especially steep in the community college sector (-15.2%) whereas public four-year colleges remain stable from last spring.

Both transfer and non-transfer enrollment is down this spring (7.9% and 5.4%, respectively, as shown in **Figure 3**). This result is contrasted with last fall's, where transfer enrollment fell by more than triple the drop in non-transfer enrollment (see Spring 2021 and Fall 2020 Comparisons below).

The 7.9 percent overall transfer decline this spring was driven by the community college sector. Students transferring into this sector fell 15.2 percent, more than 7 times the pre-pandemic decline (Figure 3). But the public four-year sector maintained its transfer enrollment at last year's level, reversing the pattern of decline prior to the pandemic.

Figure 4 demonstrates how COVID-19 related disruptions have magnified the disparity between two-year and four-year colleges by student age group. Particularly, traditional college-age transfer students (both 18-20 and 21-24) dropped precipitously this spring at community colleges while in the public four-year sector, transfer enrollment declined only slightly, or even trended upward, in all age categories.

Spring 2021 and Fall 2020 Enrollment Patterns Compared

- Large year-over-year declines (-5.9%) occurred this spring for students continuing enrollment from last fall, largely due to last fall's enrollment shortfalls. Former students returning this spring after a stop-out barely changed from a year ago (-0.4%). In contrast, far fewer former students re-enrolled last fall compared with the preceding fall.
- Former students were more likely to re-enroll at their last institution when they returned this spring after a stop-out (61%), particularly among four-year college students, whose growth slowed the overall decline in returning students this spring. Last fall, in contrast, returning students were more likely to transfer than they were pre-pandemic.
- Far fewer students started college in the spring than in the fall (comprising 5.1% of undergraduate enrollment this spring vs. 17% last fall). Freshman enrollment this spring dropped 1.9 percent from a year ago, reversing the pre-pandemic gain (+3.9%). Thus, there is little evidence to support predictions that due to the pandemic-related disruptions freshmen who would have started last fall took a gap semester to start this spring.
- Most of the spring freshmen started at a community college. Unlike in the years prior to the pandemic, transfer enrollment declines surpassed the freshman enrollment drops this spring.
- Relatively few students transfer in the middle of an academic year. Spring transfer enrollments, therefore, are not nearly as large as transfer students in the fall. Given smaller transfer enrollments in the spring, even similar rates of change year-over-year to those of the fall are subject to higher variability.
- 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 activity, lateral transfer—particularly movement between two-year institutions continued to dominate the spring 2021 term (44%).
- Black transfer enrollment fell the most across all sectors in the fall whereas White and Black student transfer fell the most in the spring.

Please note that these comparisons take into account the corrections to the [fall 2020 issue](#).

Figure 3. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Institution Sector

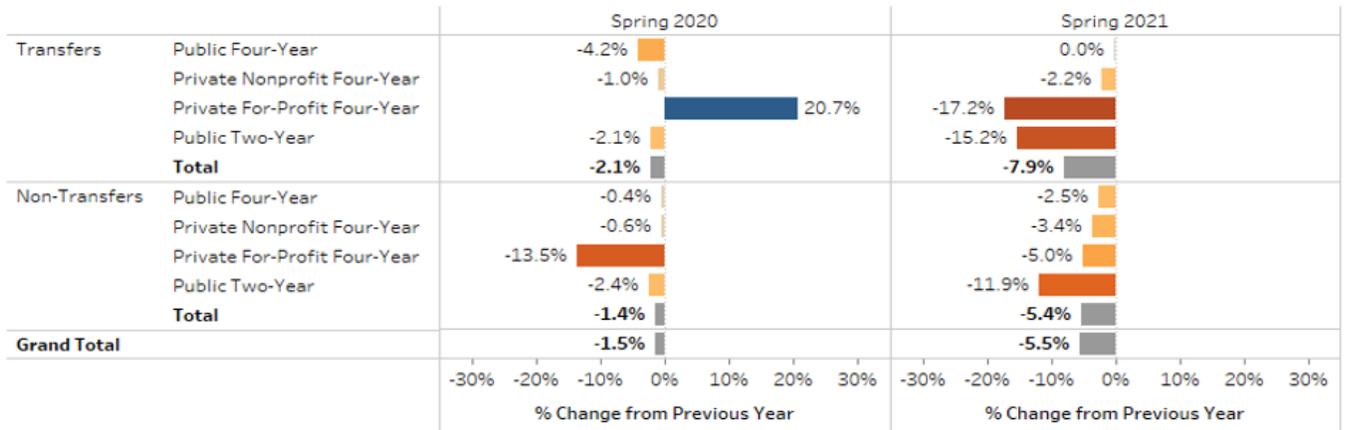
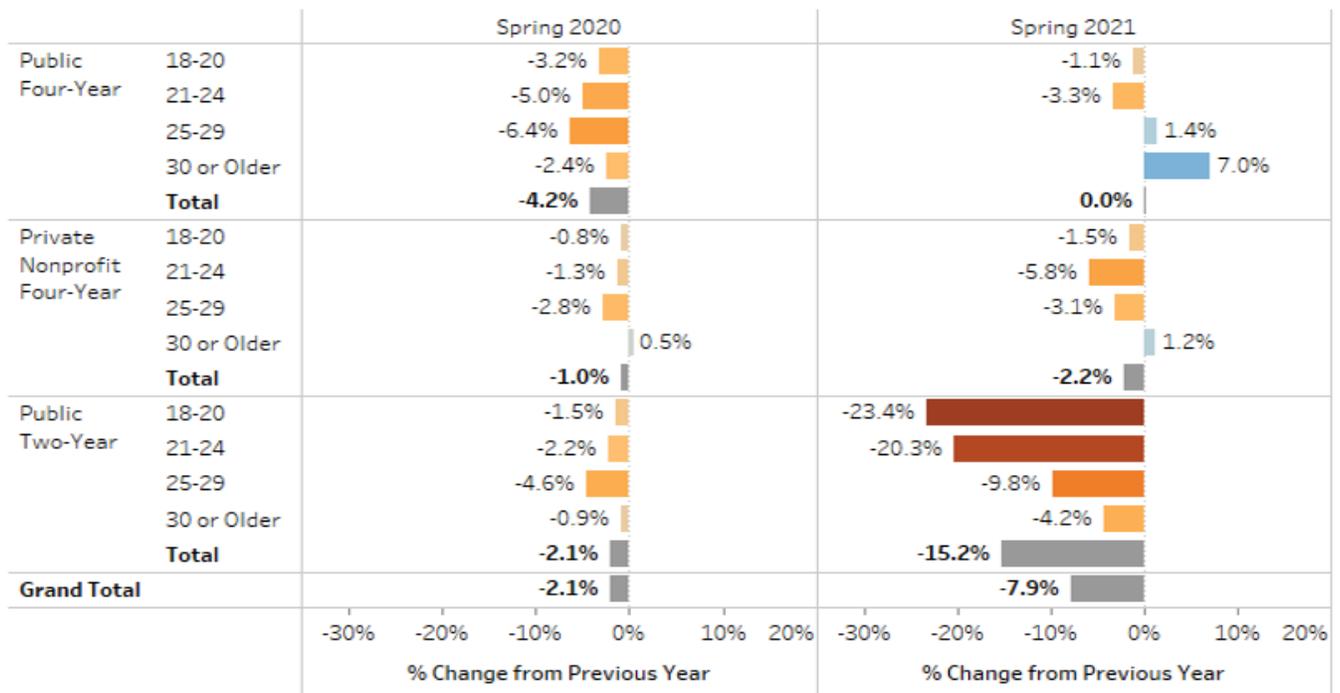


Figure 4. Change in Transfer Enrollment by Institution Sector and Age Group



Note: Due to small sample sizes, private for-profit institutions are not shown but included in the grand total.

3. Students are less mobile along all transfer pathways, except for upward transfer where students grew 3 percent this spring. Both reverse and lateral transfer suffered steep enrollment declines of 21 percent and 9.2 percent, respectively.

The only transfer pathway to increase this spring is upward transfer, where a reversal occurred from a 3.1 percent pre-pandemic decline to a 3 percent increase ([Figure 5](#)). Being the only pathway that grew during the pandemic, upward transfer, as a share of all transfer enrollment, grew nearly 4 percentage points to 36.6 percent ([Figure 6](#)).

The increase in upward transfer was led by continuing students, having swung over 10 percentage points from a 6.5 percent drop last spring to a 4.3 percent gain this year ([Figure 5](#)). Lateral transfer was the most prevalent pathway in the past two years for both continuing and returning students, but upward transfer exceeded lateral transfer for continuing students this spring ([Figure 6](#)). Although slightly more returning students transferred upwardly this year, the increase was smaller (+0.9% this year versus +2.8% last year, as shown in [Figure 5](#)).

Overall upward transfer is up among women (+5.3%) and Latinx students (+4.4%) as well as 18- to 20-year-old students (+9.3%), while falling for male (-3.3%), and White (-1.8%) students. This age group alone accounts for over 75 percent of this year's growth in upward transfer.

Examining upward transfer trends by institution sector, transfer into a public four-year college grew much more than into a private nonprofit four-year institution (+4.6% and +2.2%, respectively), swinging nearly 10 percentage points from last spring (from -5.2% to +4.6%) compared to a less than 3 percentage-point swing at private nonprofit four-year colleges.

The jump in upward transfer this spring was driven by students transferring without earning an associate degree, having increased 7.4 percent this spring, an 11.5 percentage point swing from a decline of 4.1 percent last spring. These students make up two-thirds of upward transfers (64.6%). In contrast, upward transfer students with an associate degree declined further during the pandemic (-4.3%).

Upward transfer crossing a state line continued to grow strongly (up 4.7% from last spring), now comprising 24.1 percent of all upward transfer pathways, while students transferring to a four-year institution within the state increased 2.4 percent following a 5 percent decrease last spring ([Figure 7](#)). Though out-of-state transfers increased this spring particularly for upward transfers, the majority of transfers continue to be in-state, comprising 69.7 percent of all transfers regardless of pathways.

Reverse transfer from four-year to two-year institutions is by far the largest decline of any transfer pathway this spring, down 20.9 percent compared to a 2 percent drop pre-pandemic. Reverse transfer is a declining share of all transfer pathways, dropping more than 3 percentage points to 19.4 percent this spring ([Figure 6](#)). Such decline was most pronounced among continuing students, having declined 28.1 percent following a decline of 2.2 percent last spring.

Lateral transfer, typically the most prevalent transfer pathway during spring, also declined during the pandemic, having fallen 9.2 percent after a 1.4 percent drop in the previous year. The rate of decline is similar between two-year and four-year colleges (-9.3% and -9.1%, respectively). Lateral transfer reduction this spring was driven by continuing students (-12.6%). Though steep declines during the pandemic emerged regardless of gender, lateral transfer for men fell at twice the rate of women (-14.9% versus -7.4%). This transfer pathway also declined for all age and race and ethnicity categories, falling the sharpest for 18- to 24-year-old students (-14.2%), and White (-16.7%) and Black (-12.6%) students.

Figure 5. Transfer and Mobility Overall: Spring 2020 and Spring 2021



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

Figure 6. Distribution Shifts Across Transfer Pathways by Student Group: Spring 2019-Spring 2021

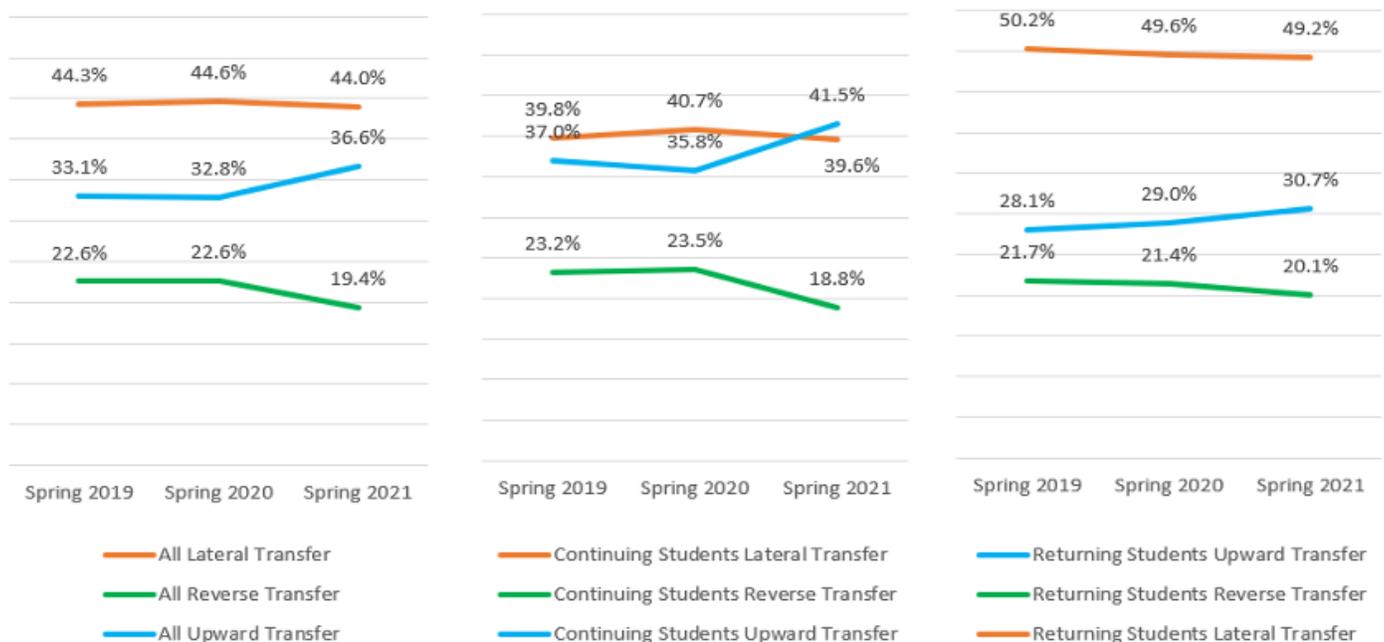


Figure 7. Transfer and Mobility Crossing State Lines: Spring 2021 and Spring 2021



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

4. Transfer enrollment decline is more evident among White and Black students than their Latinx and Asian peers. Latinx transfer enrollment currently shows the strongest growth in the public four-year sector.

Prior to the pandemic, spring transfer enrollment was on the decline especially among White students (**Figure 8a**). But COVID-19 accelerated those declines further, with White and Black transfers falling precipitously this spring (-13.9% and -10.9%, respectively), followed by Asian (-6.5%) and Latinx (-6.3%) transfer students. This trend was evident in continuing students, where Black and White transfer declines were nearly three times larger during the pandemic than pre-pandemic (-15.7% and -13.5% in-pandemic versus -5.6% and -4.7 pre-pandemic, respectively; not shown in the figure).

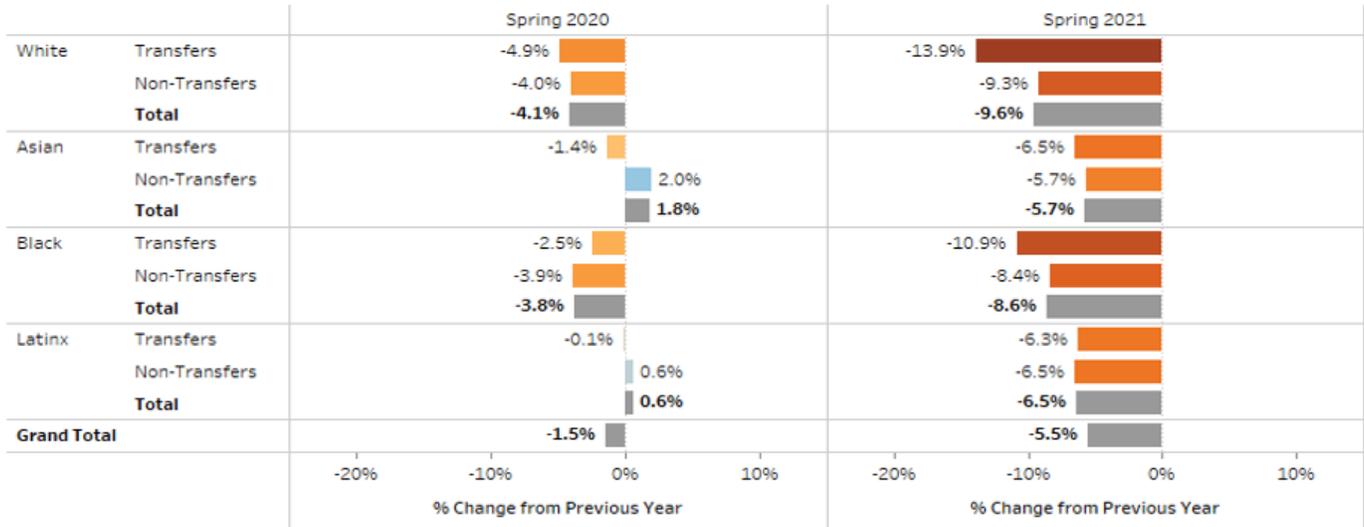
These transfer enrollment trends generally follow the pattern of decline in undergraduate enrollment overall (Figure 8a). White and Black enrollments experienced larger enrollment declines than their Latinx and Asian peers, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. In fact, enrollments were increasing slightly for Latinx students (+0.6%) and Asian students (+1.8%) prior to the pandemic but COVID-19 reversed that trend.

There is variability by institution type. At public four-year institutions, among the four major race and ethnicity groups, only White student transfers experienced a decline from last spring while Latinx transfer enrollment currently shows the strongest growth (**Figure 8b**). On the other hand, public two-year transfer enrollment fell precipitously regardless of race and ethnicity.

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, irrespective of the change in overall undergraduate enrollment. Nationally, transfer-in rates dropped slightly more during the pandemic than pre-pandemic for White and Black students in contrast to little changes among Latinx and Asian students (**Figure 9**).

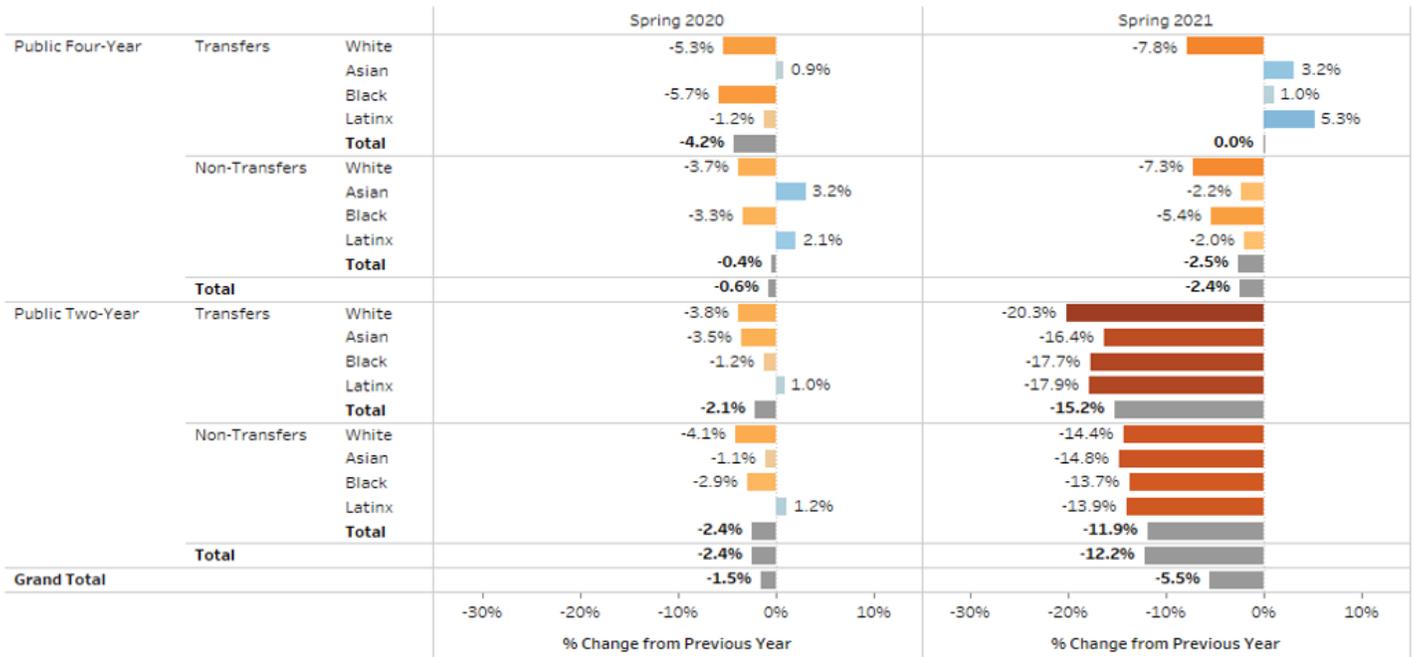
A notable contrast emerged by institution type. At public four-year colleges, transfer-in rates this spring are slightly above last spring's levels for all race and ethnicity groups, except for Whites, whose rate changed little from a year ago. At community colleges, however, transfer-in rates dropped further during the pandemic for all race and ethnicity groups, except for Asian students, whose rate remained stable from last year.

Figure 8a. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Race/Ethnicity



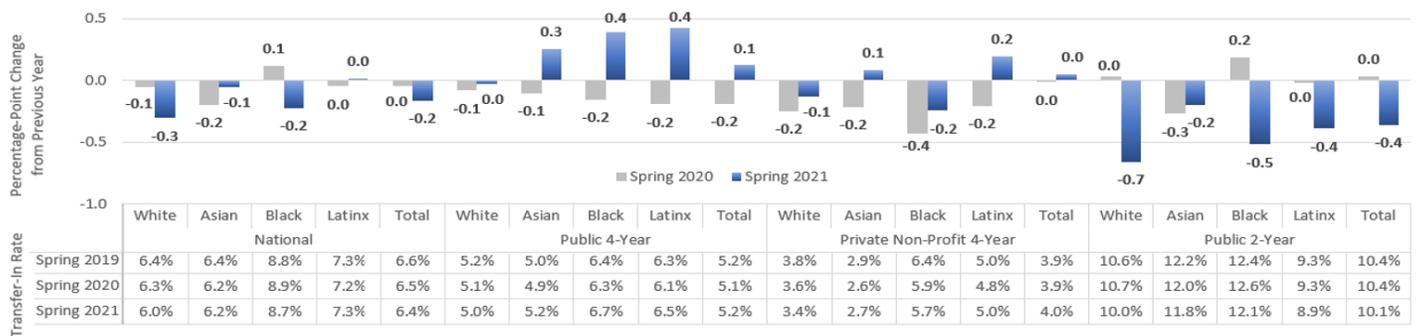
Note: Race and ethnicity declines for this initial look report may be over- or under-estimated due to higher levels of missing race/ethnicity data for 2021 (15.6% of students with missing race/ethnicity). Use caution when interpreting the race and ethnicity results throughout the report.

Figure 8b. Enrollment Changes by Institution Sector, Transfer Status, and Race/Ethnicity



Note: Due to small sample sizes, private institutions are not shown but included in the grand total. Race and ethnicity related results for this initial look report may be over- or under-estimated due to higher levels of missing race/ethnicity data for 2021 (15.6% of students with missing race/ethnicity). Use caution when interpreting the race and ethnicity results throughout the report.

Figure 9. Change in Transfer-In Rate by Race and Ethnicity for Select Institution Sectors



Note: Due to small sample sizes, private for-profit institutions are not shown but included in the national total. Race and ethnicity related results for this initial look report may be over- or under-estimated due to higher levels of missing race/ethnicity data for 2021 (15.6% of students with missing race/ethnicity). Use caution when interpreting the race and ethnicity results throughout the report.

5. With gender disparities growing across all age groups, transfer declines are larger for men especially in upward transfer.

Although transfer was on a steady decline for both men and women before the pandemic (-2.8% and -1.8%, respectively), the gender gap grew larger during the pandemic. Transfer fell more substantially for men overall (-13.5% for men versus -5.9% for women), as well as in every age category (**Figure 10**). In fact, transfer increased slightly for women aged 30 and older (+1.7%), in contrast to an 8.1 percent drop for men.

Upward transfer patterns also reveal accelerated gender disparities during the pandemic. Among continuing transfer students, women transferring upward increased 9.1 percent this spring following a 7.2 percent drop in the previous year (**Figure 11**). Their male counterparts, however, continued to decline, though the rate of decline shrank slightly (from -5.8% to -4.6%).

Lateral transfer also fell more for men among continuing students even though both men and women were dropping at the same rate pre-pandemic.

Figure 10. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Gender and Age Group

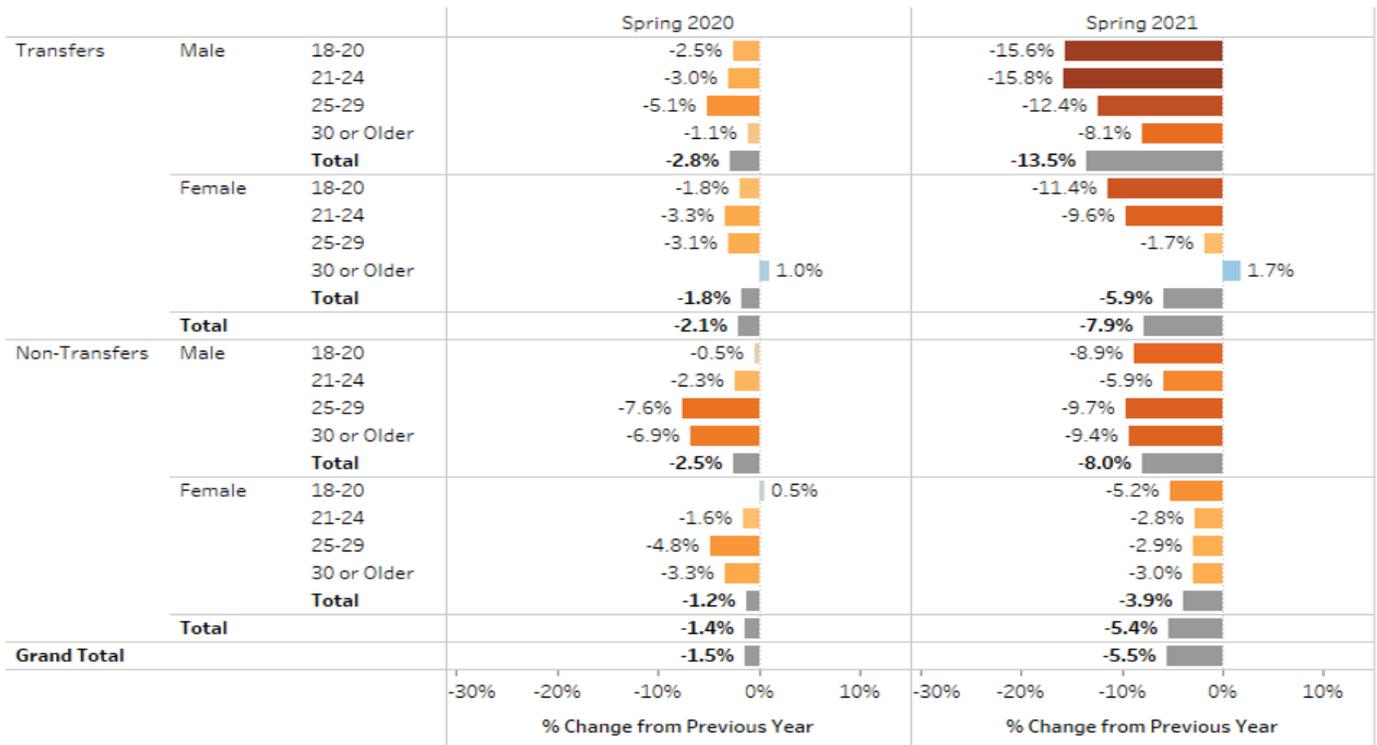
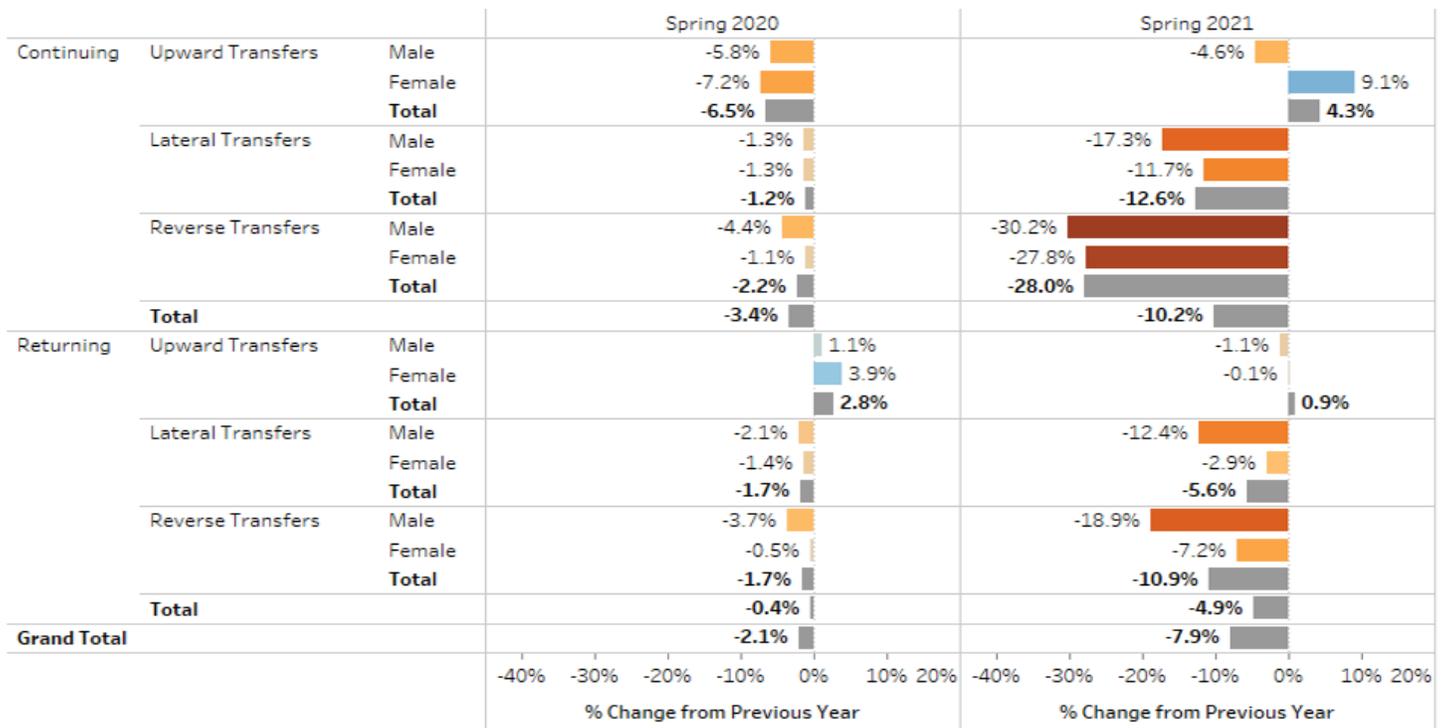


Figure 11. Change in Transfer Enrollment by Student Group, Transfer Pathway, and Gender



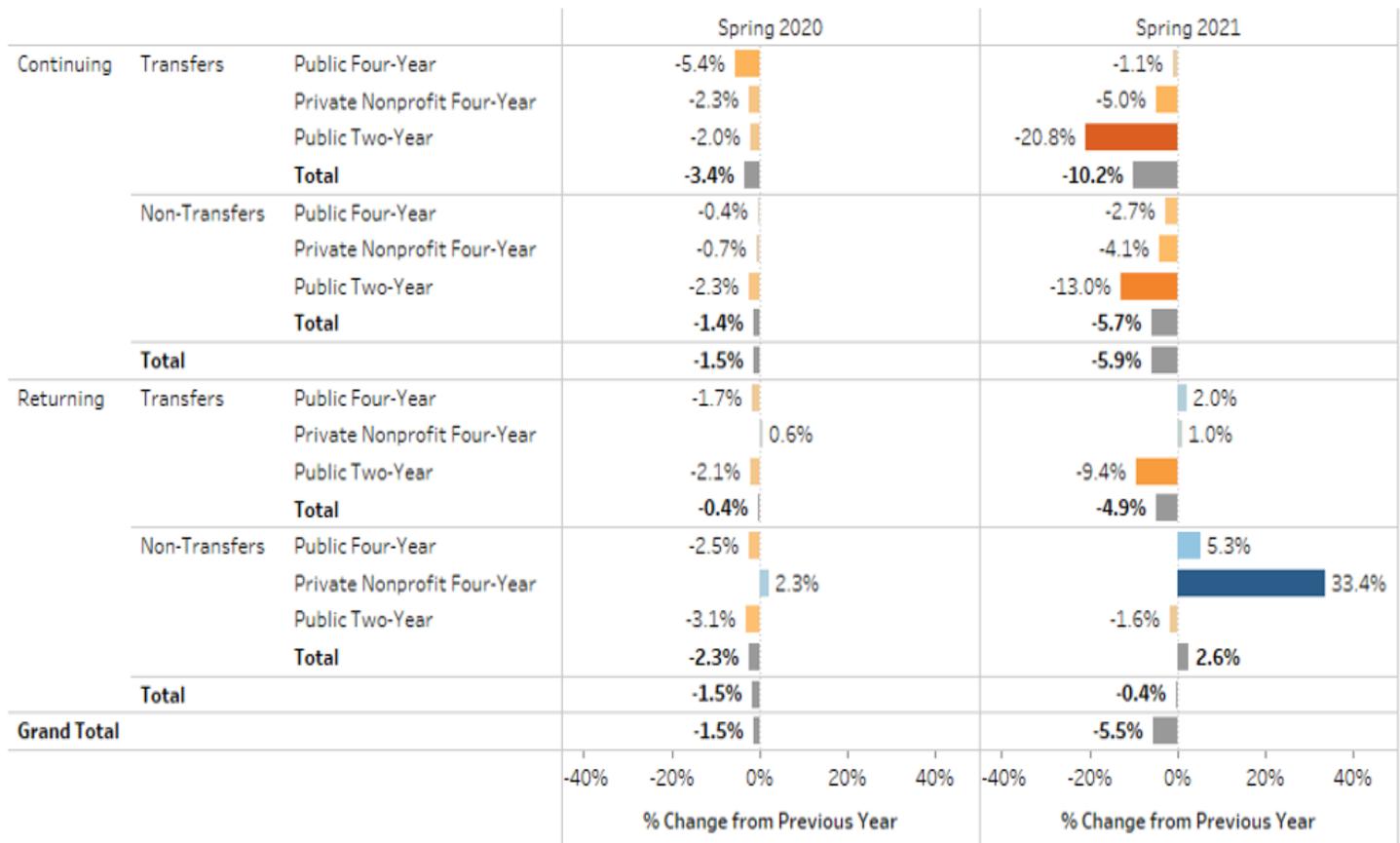
6. Transfer declined for continuing students at twice the rate of returning students this spring (-10.2% and -4.9%, respectively). Continuing students transferring to community colleges decreased tenfold from last year (-20.8%).

Among transfer students, continuing students declined at twice the rate of returning students, having fallen 10.2 percent compared to a 4.9 percent drop for returning students (Figure 12). Though declines were observed across all sectors, community colleges suffered the largest decline in continuing student transfer enrollment (-20.8%), 2.2 times the returning transfer enrollment decline (-9.4%) and 10 times the pre-pandemic loss rate (-2%). Notably, 18- to 20-year-old community college students experienced a 23.4 percent decline in transfer enrollment over last spring (not shown in the figure).

The overall decline in returning transfer students (-4.9%) was entirely due to the enrollment losses in community colleges (-9.4%). However, with continuing transfer drops surpassing returning transfer declines, returning transfers now make up the majority of transfer-in enrollment at community colleges (52.1%), up 3.3 percentage points from the pre-pandemic year. Among these returning transfers, 57.4 percent came from another public two-year institution. At public four-year colleges, on the other hand, returning transfer students increased 2 percent this spring after having fallen at nearly the same rate a year ago (Figure 10).

For context, a majority of returning transfer students reenrolled this spring in community colleges (55%), followed by public four-year colleges (28%). Most returning students this spring re-enrolled in their last enrolled institution (61%), and this share increased 1.8 percentage points from the previous year.

Figure 12. Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments by Student Group and Institution Sector



Note: Due to small sample sizes, interpret the private nonprofit four-year returning student results with caution. The for-profit four-year sector is not shown but included in the grand total.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This report is a first look into the impact of COVID-19 on spring 2021 undergraduate enrollment and transfer pathways across 74 percent of colleges reporting as of February 25. It is important to note that approximately 532,000 transfer students we identified for the current spring term are fewer than half of last fall's transfer enrollments. Although reported spring transfer patterns may reflect similar rates of change, year-over-year, to those of the fall term, estimated changes are subject to high variability in student counts.

Last fall, we found the general dampening of student transfer during the pandemic, along with signs of disproportionate impacts on disadvantaged students. The trend has largely persisted into the spring. A year into the pandemic, there are three noteworthy patterns.

First, a ripple effect of last fall's enrollment decline has led to far fewer continuing students enrolling this spring compared to a year ago. The 10.2 percent transfer enrollment decline among continuing students can be explained partly by having fewer students enrolled last fall to begin with. Among students who were enrolled in the fall, however, there was also a higher fall-to-spring attrition rate, as well as a decline in transfer activity among those who did continue enrollment into this spring. All these effects are attributable to the pandemic.

Transfer enrollment also declined among returning students, although at half the rate (-4.9%). This suggests that former students re-enrolling after a stop-out had little mitigating effect on overall transfer declines due to the pandemic. In both the continuing and returning student categories, transfer enrollment declines this spring were largely borne by the community college sector—the worst hit sector by COVID-19.

Second, all transfer pathways continue to be impacted during the pandemic. While reverse and lateral transfers faced drastic declines of 21 and 9.2 percent, respectively, upward transfer rose 3 percent from a year ago, with continuing students, traditional college-age students, and those without an associate degree contributing to the growth. Interestingly for this spring, COVID-19 accelerated the decline in transfer particularly for White and Black students, male students, and traditional college-age students.

Finally, the enrollment trajectories of four-year and two-year institutions continue to diverge due to COVID-19 related disruptions. Four-year institutions have tended to maintain steady transfer-in enrollments amid the pandemic, with a growing number of continuing students transferring in from two-year institutions. Community colleges, in contrast, have tended to lose enrollments due not only to growing upward transfers, but also to fewer reverse transfers and diminishing incoming enrollments of new students.

Although relatively few students transfer in the middle of an academic year, the transfer outcomes this spring is evidence that the impacts of the pandemic remain clear 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 first look spring 2021 report shows transfer pathways across 74 percent of the Clearinghouse universe of institutions reported as of February 25, 2021. It focuses on year-over-year percent changes in enrollment based on the same institutions' spring 2020 and spring 2019 reporting as of February 25 each year.

Report	Spring Term	Submission Window	Institutional Coverage
Spring #1	1/1 – 3/31	1/1 – 2/25	73.7%

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 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 February 25. 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.

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 23 percent of all enrollments, and an average of 19 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, 11 percent more transfer students are missing or unknown race and ethnicity this spring (as of Feb 25) compared with the previous year; 21 percent more missing or unknown at the public four-year sector and 6.1 percent more at community colleges. Race and ethnicity results should be considered preliminary, and readers should use caution when interpreting these results. These will be updated with more data in the next final spring 2021 update.

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

Causey, J., Harnack-Eber, A., Huie, F., Lang, R., Liu, Q., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (April 2021), *COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress, First Look Spring 2021 Report*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.