

RESEARCH REPORT

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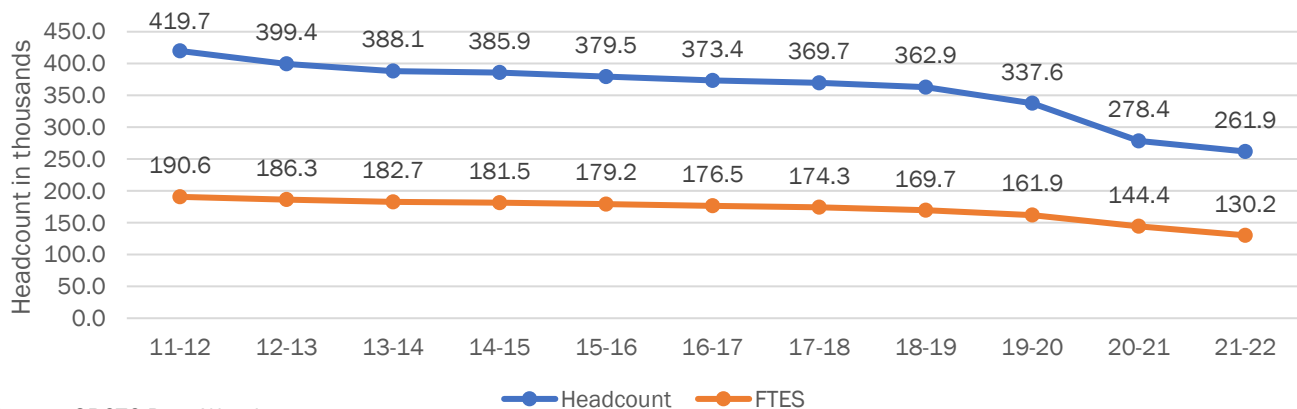
ANNUAL ENROLLMENT SUMMARY 2021-22

Washington’s community and technical colleges (CTCs) enrolled 261.9 thousand students in academic year (AY) 2021-22, a decline of 6 percent compared with the prior year. On a full-time equivalent student (FTES) basis, CTCs enrolled 130.2 thousand FTES, down 10 percent compared with last year. This report explores the shifting enrollment landscape in AY 2021-22, detailing where enrollment has continued to slide and where it shows signs of recovery. State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) research staff are compiling a more comprehensive report on the enrollment changes experienced by CTCs since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be released later in 2022.

Washington’s CTC enrollment decline is not unique to the state. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center, headcount across all public two-year institutions in the US dropped 7.8 percent in the most recently reported term, Spring 2022¹. NSC notes “all sectors of higher education experienced varying degrees of enrollment declines”, but public sector and undergraduate enrollment declines weighed heaviest on postsecondary participation.

Community and technical colleges throughout the state continue to navigate an environment that has seen enrollment decline from a peak in the wake of The Great Recession, and then drop at an accelerated pace during pandemic-related challenges in more recent years, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Washington CTC headcount and FTES enrollment, AY 2011-12 through AY 2021-22 (in thousands)



Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

¹ <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>

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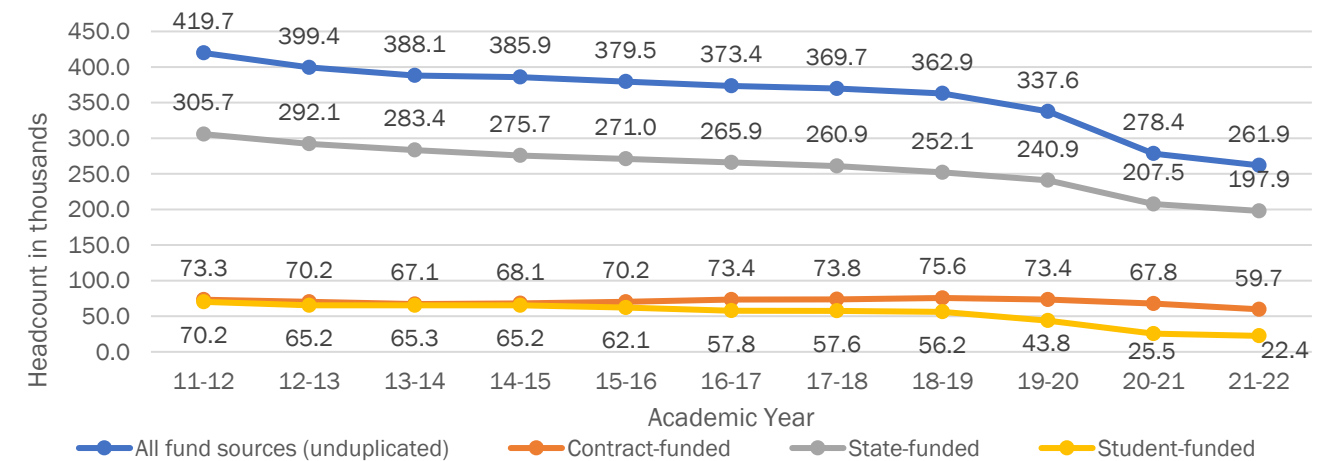
Travis Dulany
Policy Research Associate
Education Division – Policy Research
360-704-1070
tdulany@sbctc.edu

Student Characteristics

Fund Source²

State-funded students are the largest of the funding categories and saw the least severe year-over-year decline in headcount, down 5 percent. For comparison, both contract- and student-funded headcount enrollment were down 12 percent. Contract-funded enrollment was the only fund source to experience growth in recent years, increasing between 2013-14 and 2018-19, largely driven by growing Running Start enrollment. The decline of students in this fund category since the start of the pandemic can be partially explained by the drop in Running Start, further discussed later in this report, and a steep drop of Department of Corrections (DoC) students since 2017-18, falling from 8,587 DoC-contracted students that year to 4,566 in 2021-22.

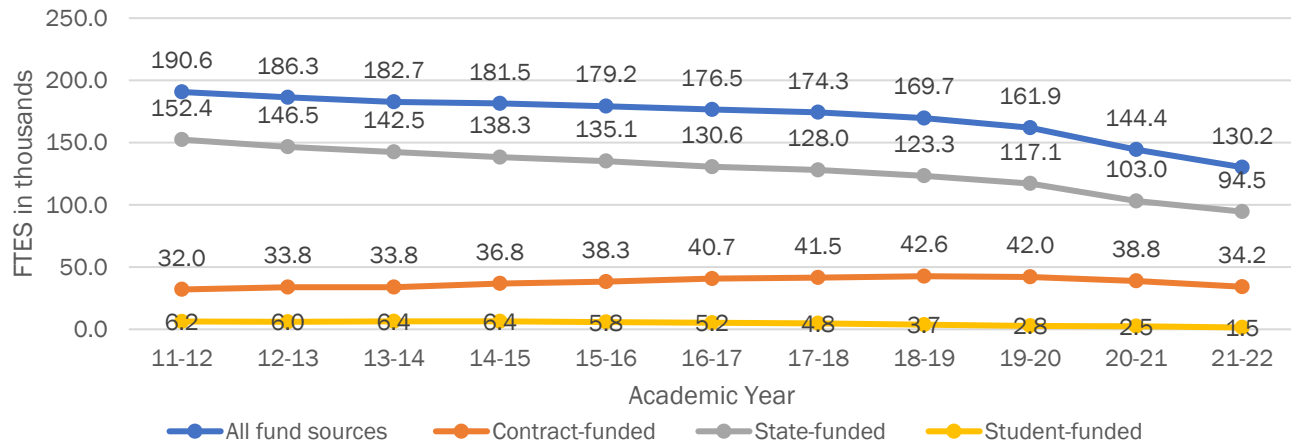
Figure 2. Headcount by fund source, AY 2011-12 through AY 2021-22 (in thousands)



On a full-time equivalent basis, enrollment among state-funded students was down 8 percent year over year. Contract-funded FTES declined 12 percent, in line with their headcount percent change. Student-funded FTES dropped 41 percent, but this is the result of fund-source classification changes at one college, not a signal of actual enrollment in this fund-source category (excluding the college with the fund-source reclassification would yield an 8 percent year-over-year FTES increase).

² State-supported students are funded by a combination of legislative appropriation of state funds, plus student tuition. Contract-supported students are funded by grants and contracts with external organizations. High school dual enrollment programs (for example, Running Start), college in prisons, and a portion of international student programs are the three largest contract-supported programs. Student-funded or self-support enrollments are funded entirely through fees paid by students. Examples of student-funded courses are personal enrichment; parent education; and professional certifications such as human resources, project management, and IT software.

Figure 3. FTES by fund source, AY 2011-12 through AY 2021-22 (in thousands)



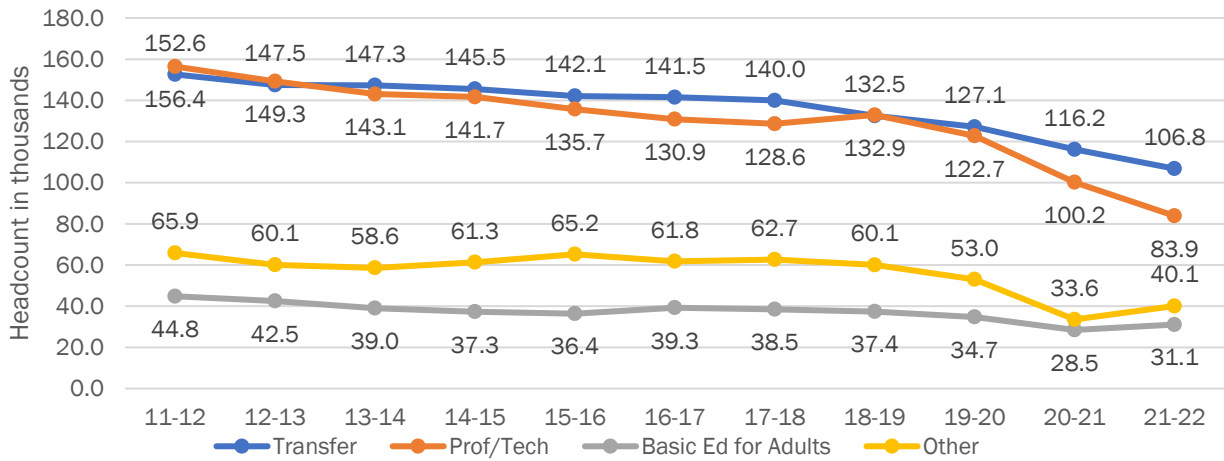
Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Mission Area

Basic Education for Adults (BEa) student enrollment has proven to be an area of recovery this year, with headcount enrollment increasing 9 percent compared with AY 2020-21. Additionally, students outside the three main mission area categories, those classified as “Other” in Figure 4, rebounded 19 percent year over year. It is not immediately clear why Other students experienced such a strong recovery, but a reversion to the mean was likely after enrollment in this category dropped 37 percent between AY 2019-20 and AY 2020-21. Before the pandemic, enrollment in the Other category was fairly stable, averaging about 62 thousand students per year.

Professional/Technical headcount experienced another double-digit percent decline in AY 2021-22, dropping 16 percent year over year to 83.9 thousand students. Transfer student headcount saw an 8 percent drop compared with the prior year, bringing Transfer student headcount to 106.8 thousand students. Early in the pandemic, SBCTC researchers hypothesized that two programs experiencing the most substantial declines – BEa and Prof/Tech – were most challenged in delivering educational services in a remote environment, which would explain the extensive declines. As COVID mitigation restrictions ease and BEa enrollments recover, however, additional factors may be contributing to the slide in Prof/Tech enrollment, which will need to be explored further.

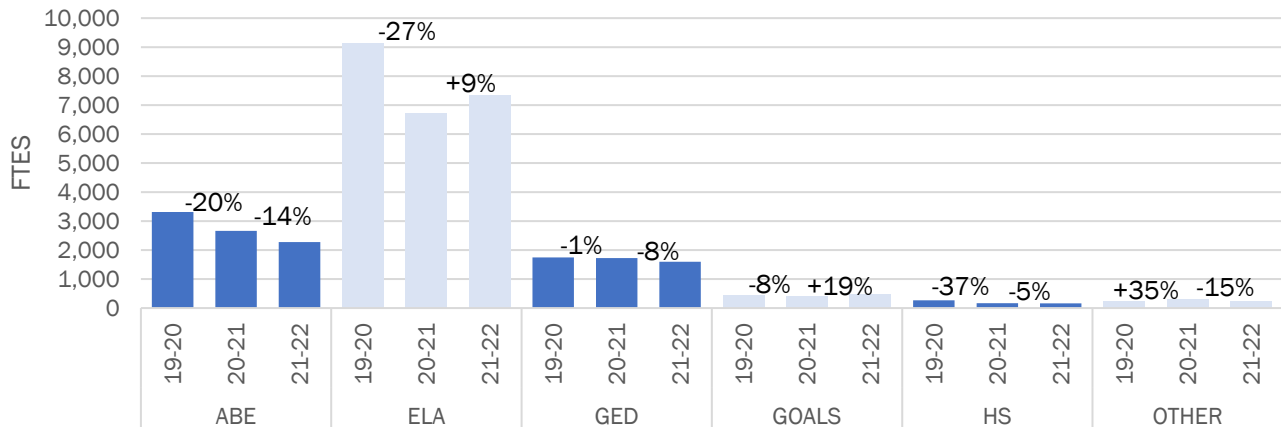
Figure 4. Headcount by mission area, AY 2011-12 through AY 2021-22 (in thousands)



Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

The recovery among BEdA students is driven by enrollment in English language acquisition (ELA) courses, the largest basic education course category. FTES enrollment in ELA courses increased 9 percent in AY 2021-22.

Figure 5. FTES in Basic Education for Adults coursework, AY 2019-20 through AY 2021-22

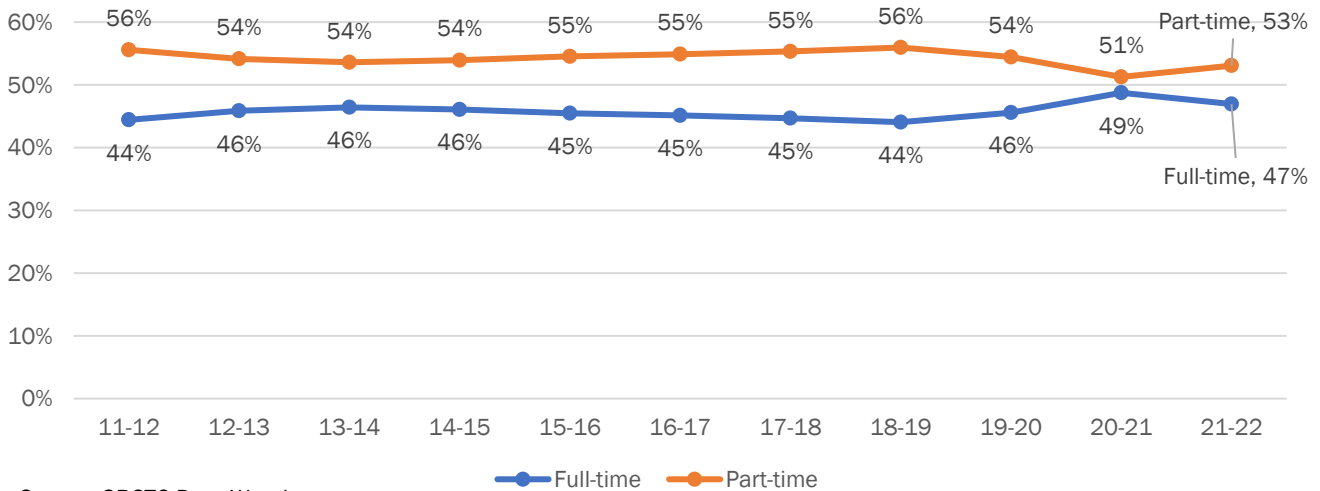


Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Full-time or Part-time Status

Since at least AY 2011-12, the percent of students enrolled part-time hovered between 54 percent and 56 percent, but in the pandemic-era this ratio began to even out, with a near 50-50 split between full-time and part-time students in AY 2020-21. This academic year, however, the proportion has diverged toward the trend experienced in the 2010s, with 53 percent of students enrolling part-time and 47 percent full-time.

Figure 6. Percent of headcount enrolled full-time or part-time, AY 2011-12 through 2021-22

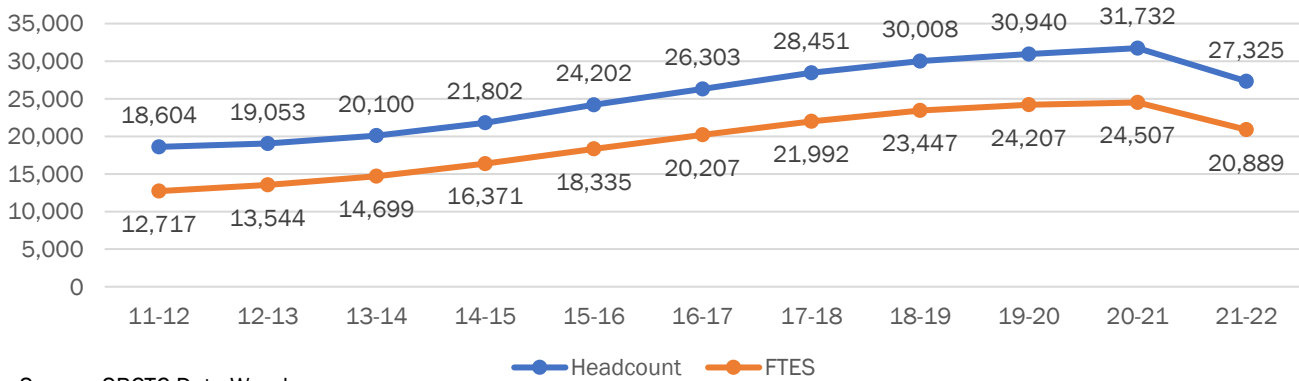


Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Select Programs: Running Start and Applied Baccalaureate

Running Start, a program where 11th and 12th grade students take college courses at a CTC while earning both high school and college credit, has experienced steady growth over the course of the program’s existence. FTES in Running Start have nearly doubled over the last 10 years, although growth has leveled in more recent years. However, AY 2021-22 is the first year the program shrank, dropping from 31.7 thousand students in AY 2020-21 to 27.3 thousand students in AY 2021-22, down 14 percent, while FTES enrollment is down 15 percent.

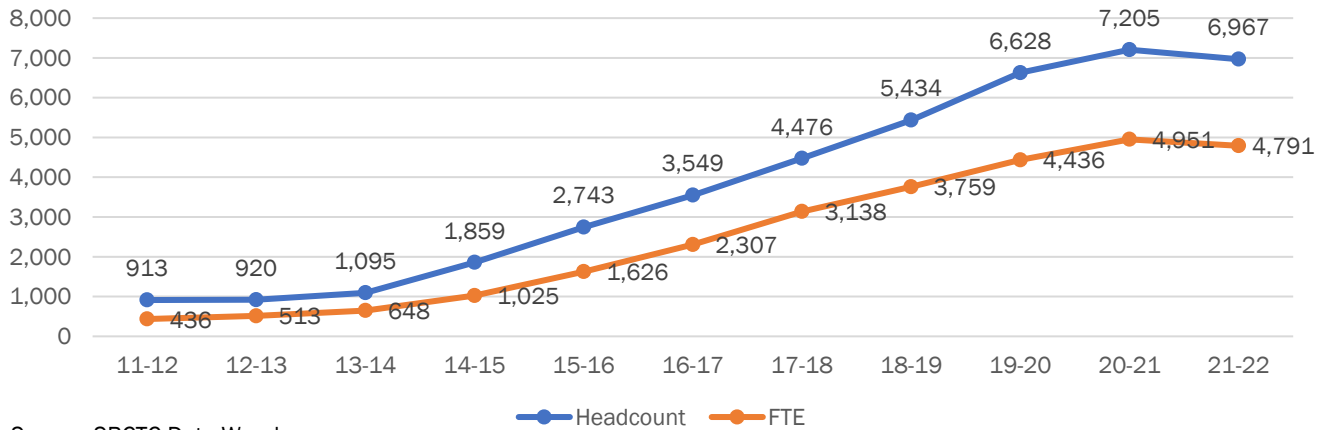
Figure 7. Running Start enrollment



Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Similarly, Applied Baccalaureate (AB) enrollment declined for the first time, though at a lesser rate. Both headcount and full-time equivalent enrollment were down 3 percent compared with AY 2020-21.

Figure 8. Applied Baccalaureate enrollment



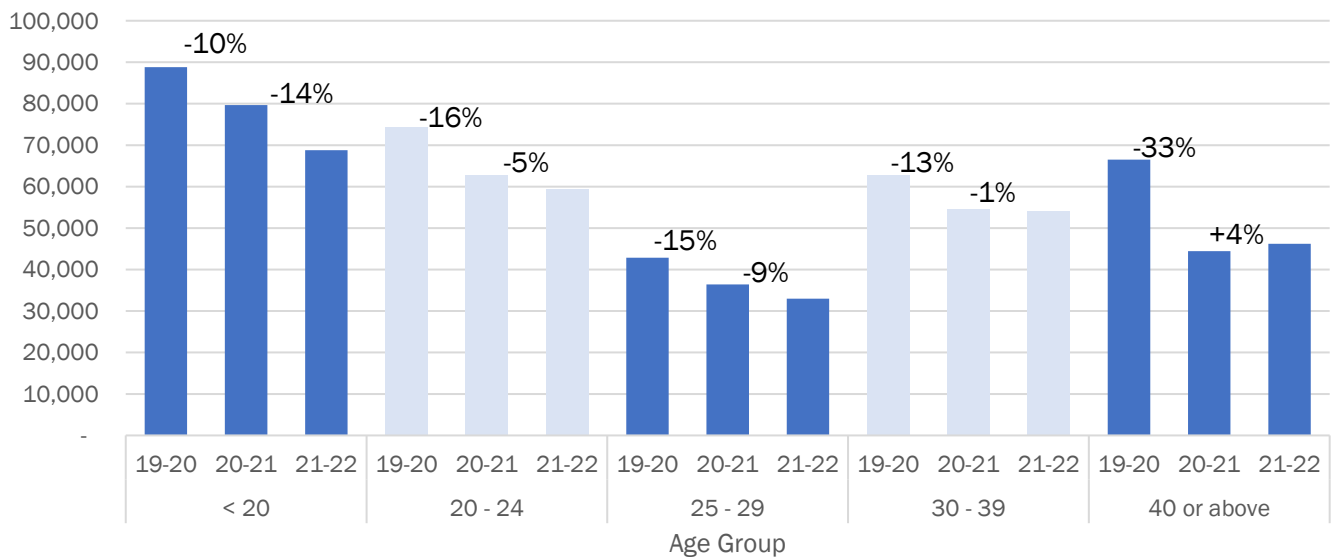
Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Student Demographics

Age Groups

In AY 2020-21, COVID-related mitigation measures appeared to affect older students the most, with enrollment of students ages 40 and older dropping 33 percent that year. The decline in the first year of the pandemic among students under 20 years of age was the lowest, at -10 percent. This year, the opposite has occurred, with enrollment of students ages 40 and older actually increasing year over year (+4%), while the decline among students younger than 20 was the largest (-14 percent). Some factors behind these shifting trends may include lower Running Start participation and increased BEdA and continuing education (see “Other “mission area in Figure 4) participation, which serve populations that tend to skew toward older students.

Figure 9. Headcount by age group, AY 2019-20 through AY 2021-22

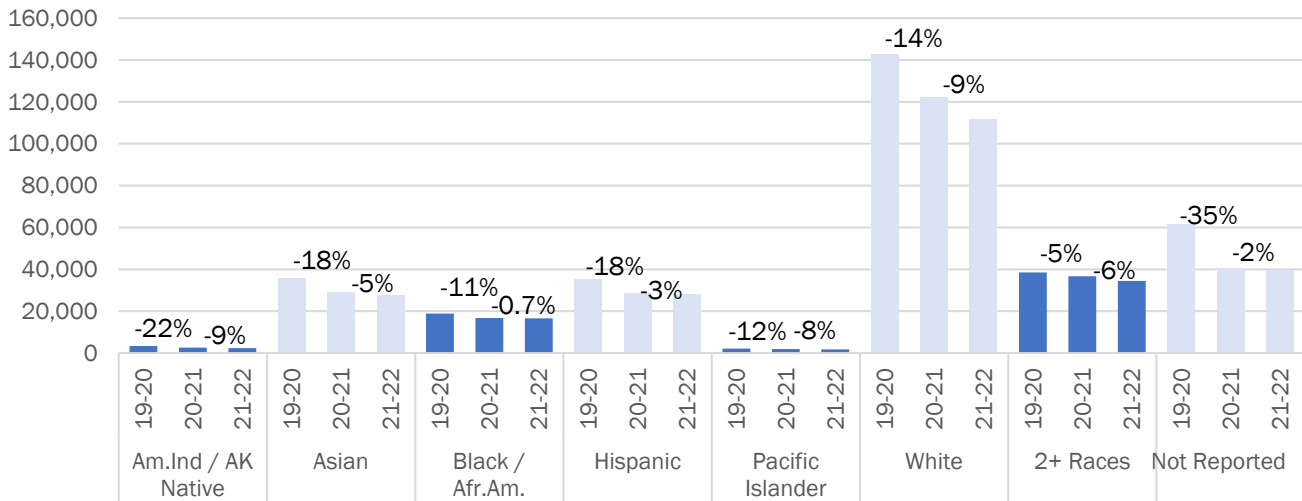


Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Race/Ethnicity

Three demographic groups experienced enrollment declines less severe than the system average of -6 percent – students reporting as Black/African American, Asian, or Hispanic. Enrollment among students identifying as Black/African American was nearly flat in AY 2021-22 when compared with the prior year, down 0.7 percent. Headcount for students reporting as Hispanic was also relatively stable at -3 percent year over year, a positive sign given the sharp 18 percent drop the year before. Similarly, students identifying as Asian also experienced a steep 18 percent decline early in the pandemic, but this improved in AY 2021-22, with a year-over-year decline of just 5 percent. The pandemic most affected enrollment of students reporting as American Indian or Alaska Native, and enrollment declines in AY 2021-22 were again the steepest for these students, down 9.2 percent.

Figure 10. Headcount by race/ethnicity, AY 2019-20 through AY 2021-22



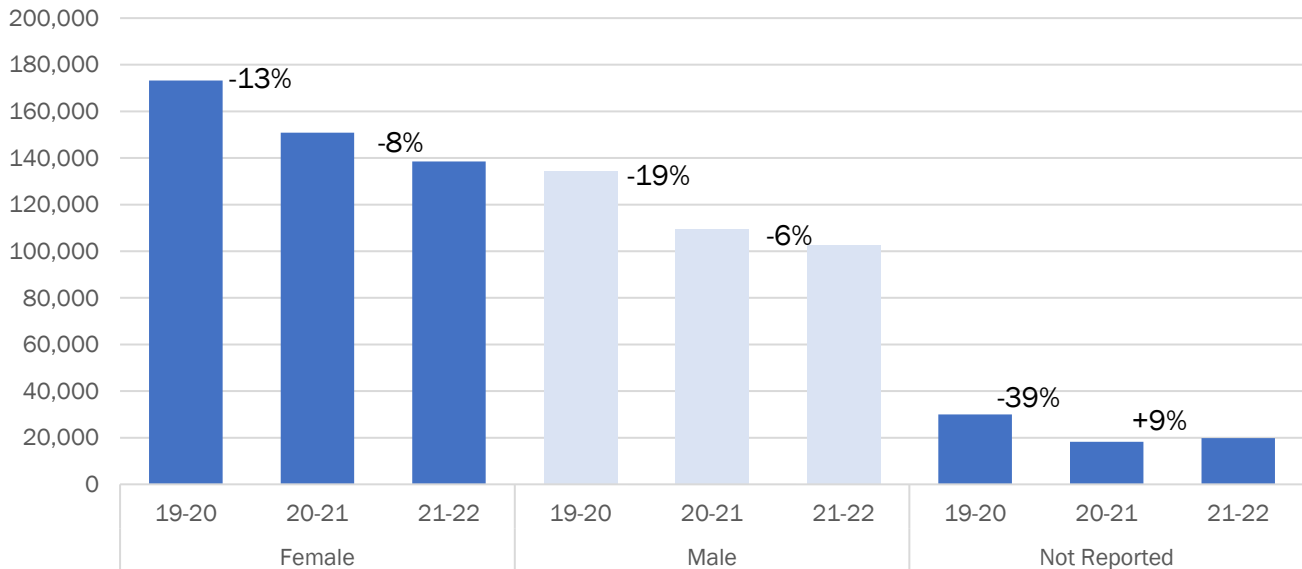
Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Sex

Students identifying as female declined 8 percent, and those identifying as male were down 6 percent in AY 2021-22. Some the changes in year-over-year enrollment may be masked by the increased number of students who did not report a sex. In AY 2021-22, nearly 800 students reported they were Not Exclusively Male or Female, a newly deployed value for this demographic indicator, which may increase in utilization over time³. Because the value Not Exclusively Male or Female is relatively new, year-over-year percent changes may be misleading (+1,187 percent in AY 2021-22, for example) and therefore are not shown in Figure 11.

³ <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/data-services/data-warehouse/student.pdf#page=47>

Figure 11. Headcount by sex, AY 2019-20 through AY 2021-22



Source: SBCTC Data Warehouse

Conclusion

The nature of community and technical colleges allows these institutions to quickly adapt to what students and employers need for a successful workforce. However, even the most agile institutions will be challenged to adapt to the constantly changing environment brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier on, the pandemic appeared to affect older, Prof/Tech and BEdA students the most, but AY 2021-22 saw previously resilient participation in programs like Running Start and Applied Baccalaureate decline for the first time. Whether these trends are temporary reactions to changing circumstances or more permanent shifts in educational program demand remains to be seen. SBCTC Policy Research will continue to study not only the enrollment figures across colleges, but also the external factors that may influence Washingtonians' decision whether to enroll at a CTC, with a forthcoming paper later in 2022.



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Except where otherwise noted

CONTACT INFORMATION

Travis Dulany
 Policy Research Associate
 Education Division – Policy Research
 360-704-1070
 tdulany@sbctc.edu