

Washington Public Enrollment Trends

Fall 2023 Enrollment Update

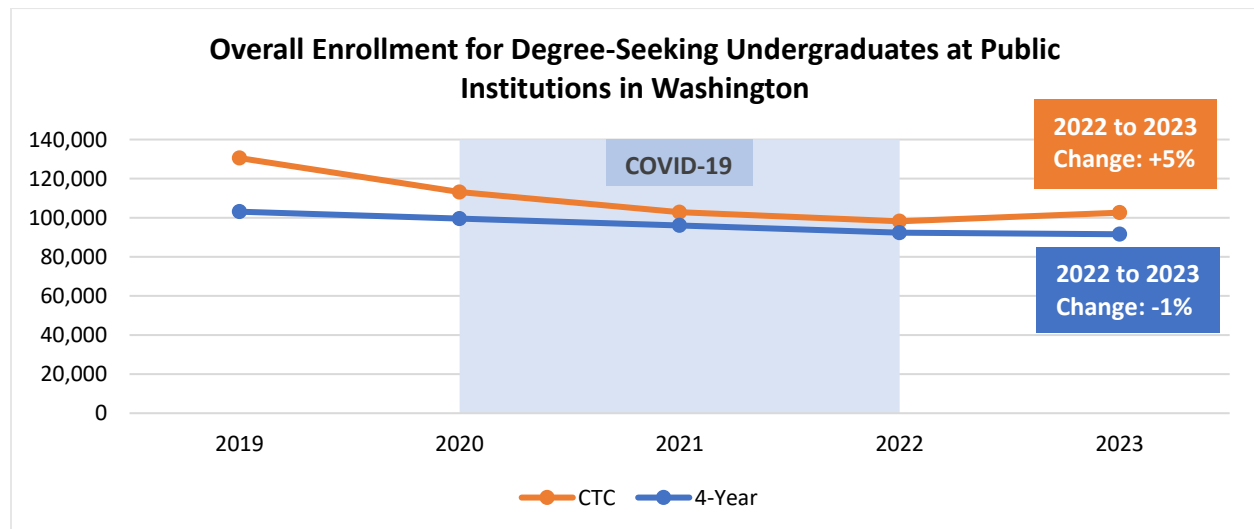
Research Brief

March 2024



Shifting enrollment trends at public institutions in Washington show the first signs of recovery since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Postsecondary institutions in Washington saw the first signs of positive enrollment trends in fall 2023 after three years of pandemic-induced decline.¹ Enrollment for degree-seeking students at community and technical colleges (CTCs) increased by 5% in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022, the first uptick in enrollment since the pandemic. At public 4-year institutions, fall 2023 enrollment decreased by 1% for degree-seeking undergraduates, however this decline was smaller than the 3% drops over the prior three years during the pandemic. Despite these signs of recovery, the state has a long way to go to return to pre-pandemic enrollment levels. There were about 28,000 fewer students enrolled at CTCs in fall 2023 than before the pandemic in fall 2019, amounting to a 21% decline over the four-year period. At public 4-year institutions, there were about 12,000 fewer undergraduates enrolled in fall 2023 than in fall 2019, or an 11% decline over the four-year period.



Given the severity of the COVID-19 enrollment decline, it may take time to recover and rebuild our state's postsecondary system. As we emerge into the post-pandemic era, it is critical to continue monitoring enrollment trends, overall and for different groups of students, to build an even stronger postsecondary system that can help prepare Washington residents for successful futures. This research brief describes fall enrollment trends for degree-seeking undergraduate students at public postsecondary institutions in Washington with a focus on year-over-year changes in fall 2023.

¹ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention declared the end of the COVID-19 federal public health emergency in May 2023, marking the transition into a post-pandemic era. See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/end-of-phe.html>

About the Data

Data for this analysis comes from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) and the Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC).

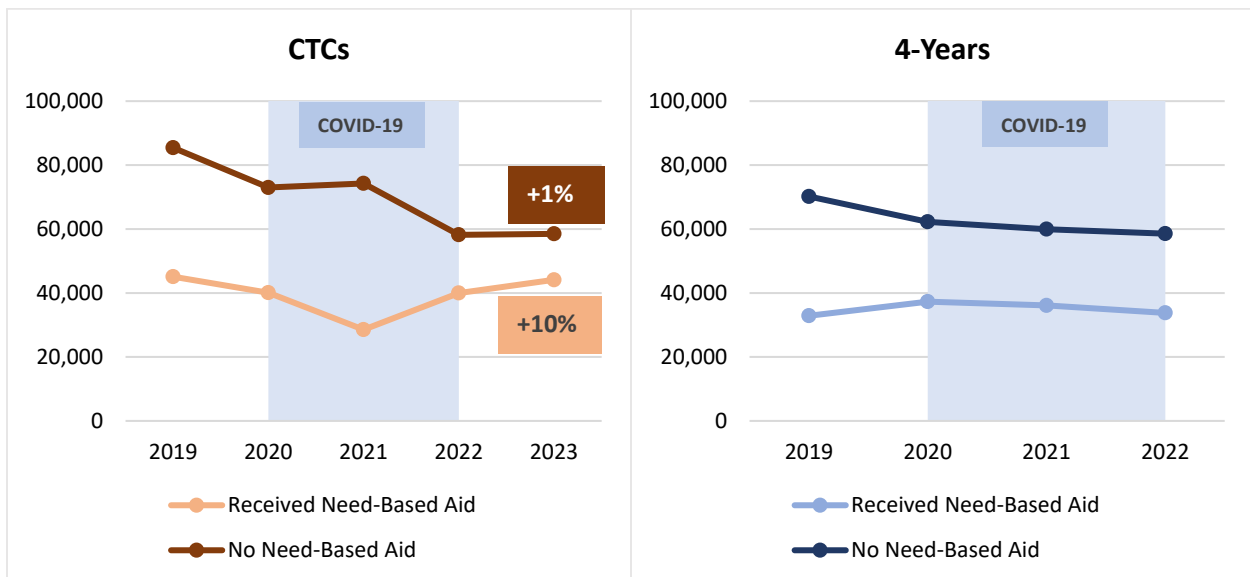
Enrollment data is for degree-seeking undergraduate students enrolled at public institutions in Washington. Data excludes high school students enrolled in dual credit (i.e., Running Start).

Each figure includes a shaded blue area that indicates the terms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data labels show the year-over-year percent change in enrollment from fall 2022 to fall 2023.

See the [Washington Public Enrollment Trends](#) report for more detail.

Enrollment by Financial Aid Status

At the beginning of the pandemic, need-based aid may have helped stave off some of the sharpest enrollment declines.² This time period also aligned with the expansion of the Washington College Grant, which made more students eligible for need-based aid. At CTCs, enrollment increased more substantially for students who received need-based aid in fall 2023 than students who did not receive need-based aid, with increases of 10% and 1% respectively. Enrollment data by financial aid status for fall 2023 is not yet available at 4-year institutions. (Note: the definition of financial aid status in this analysis differs between sectors. See Footnote 2.)

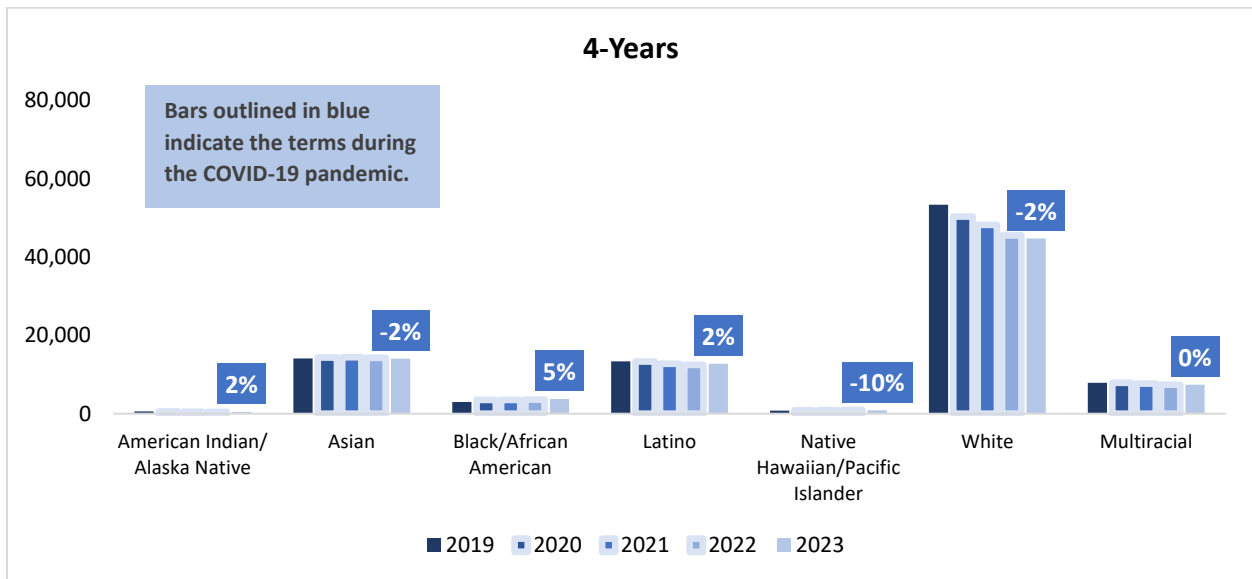
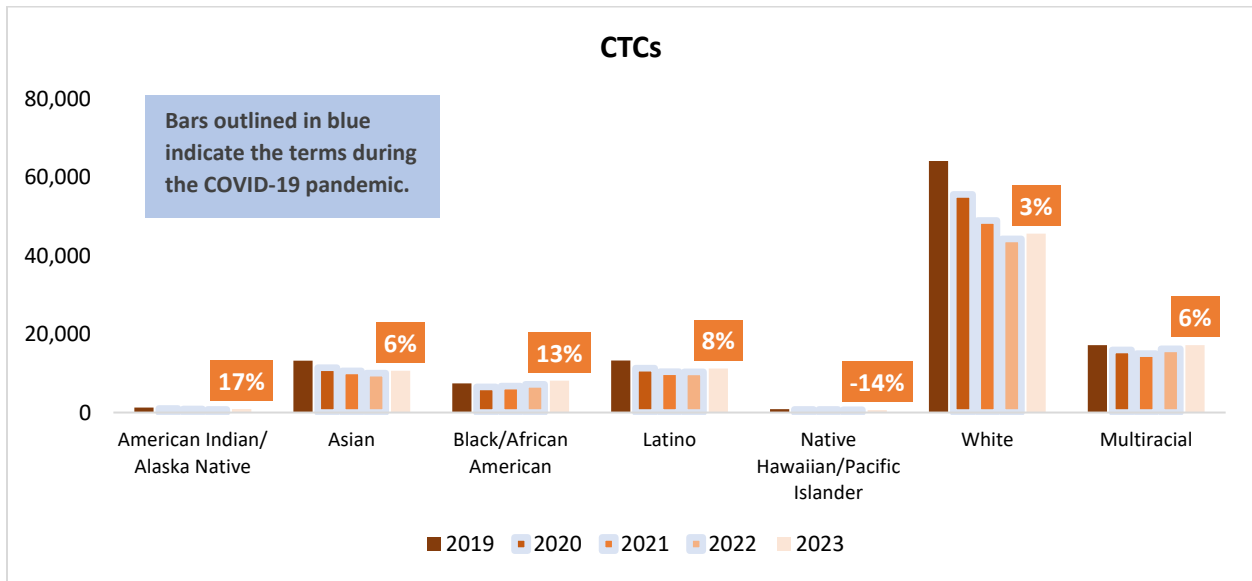


Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022. Fluctuation in CTC enrollment by financial aid status may stem from a variety of factors. As the pandemic caused disruptions, expansion of the Washington College Grant provided access to more students, resulting in a higher proportion of students categorized as “economically disadvantaged.” This coincided with a new data system rollout, which shifted the methodology of defining “economically disadvantaged” from a local definition to statewide, uniform criteria.

² Data on financial aid receipt comes directly from the 4-year institutions and CTCs and data availability differs slightly across the two data sources. Due to data availability, this report defines financial assistance or financial aid at 4-year institutions as receiving the Washington College Grant or the Pell Grant only. This definition does not consider all other need-based aid such as institutional grants or Washington’s College Bound Scholarship. At CTCs, financial assistance refers to students identified as economically disadvantaged in the CTC data system, which includes students receiving any need-based financial aid or waivers or who are enrolled in Workfirst, Basic Food Employment Training, or Displaced Homemaker programs (see <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/data-services/data-warehouse/student.pdf>).

Enrollment by Race

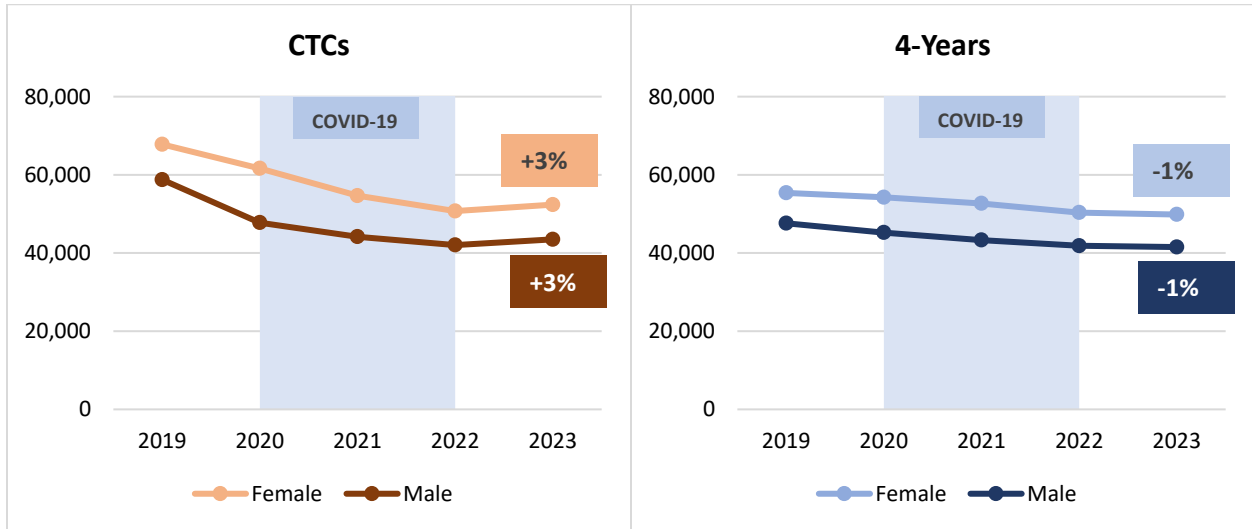
During the pandemic between fall 2020 and fall 2022, American Indian/Alaska Native and white students had the largest enrollment declines in both sectors. In fall 2023, all racial groups aside from Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students saw increased enrollment at CTCs. Enrollment increases were largest among Latino, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. At 4-year institutions, enrollment also increased among Black/African American, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students, while it decreased or remained steady for all other groups.



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Enrollment by Gender

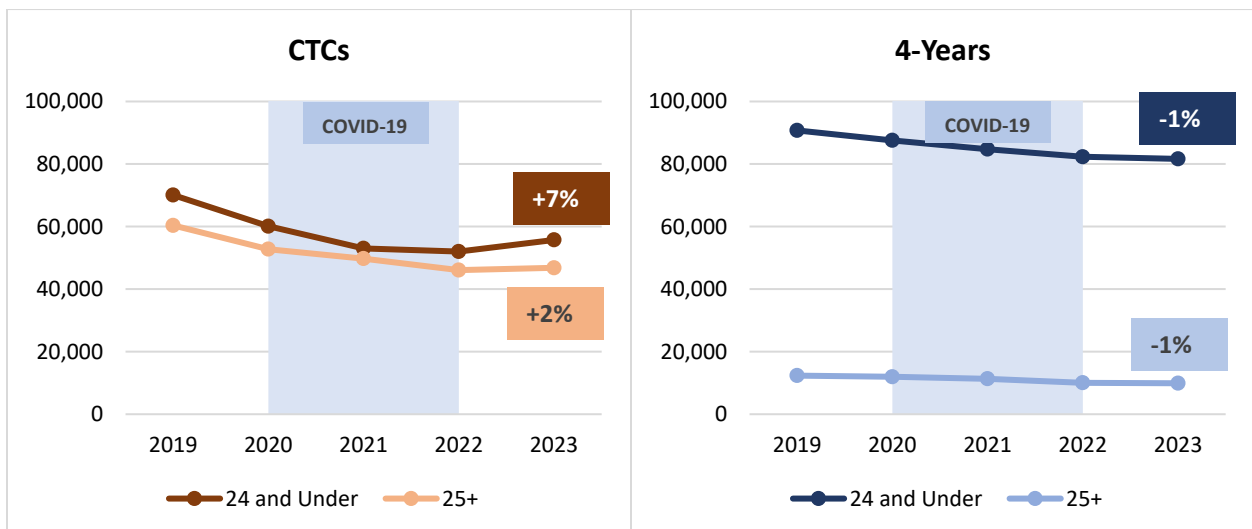
Enrollment declined slightly more for male students than female students in both sectors at the onset of the pandemic. However, between fall 2022 and fall 2023, enrollment trends by gender were parallel. At CTCs, male and female students both saw a 3% enrollment increase. At 4-year institutions, male and female students both had a 1% decline.



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Enrollment by Age

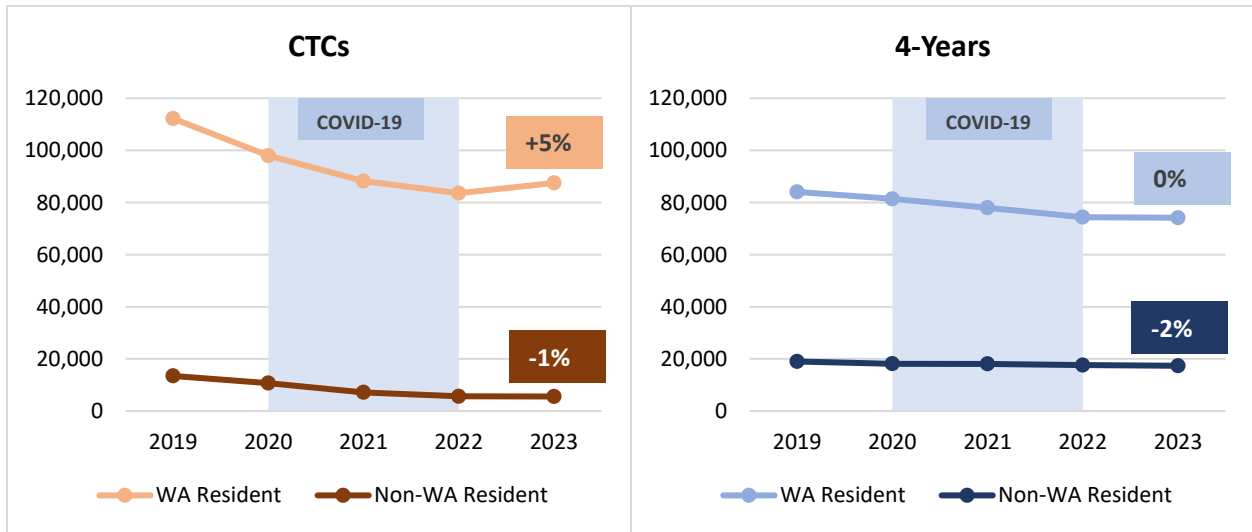
Younger students experienced larger enrollment declines at the beginning of the pandemic than older students, but the pattern has since changed. At CTCs in Fall 2023, enrollment increased much more for younger students than older students. At 4-year institutions, enrollment decline was parallel for younger and older students.



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Enrollment by State Residency

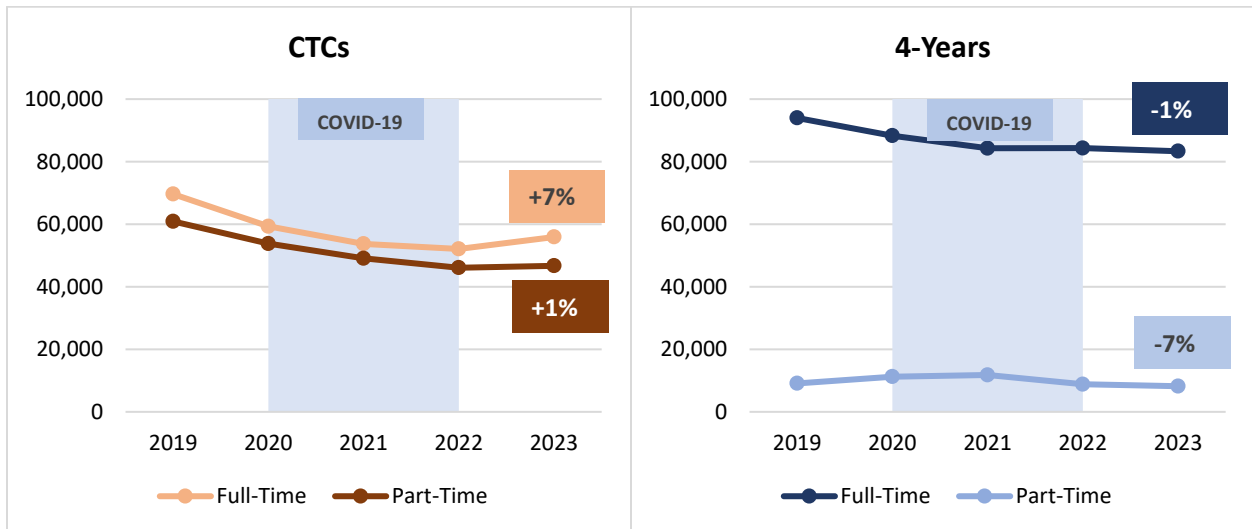
At the start of the pandemic, enrollment declined more drastically for Washington residents, but the trend has shifted. At CTCs, enrollment for Washington residents increased by 5% in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022, while enrollment decreased by 1% for non-Washington residents. At 4-year institutions, fall 2023 enrollment remained steady compared to fall 2022 for Washington residents, while it dropped by 2% for non-Washington residents.



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Enrollment by Students' Enrollment Intensity

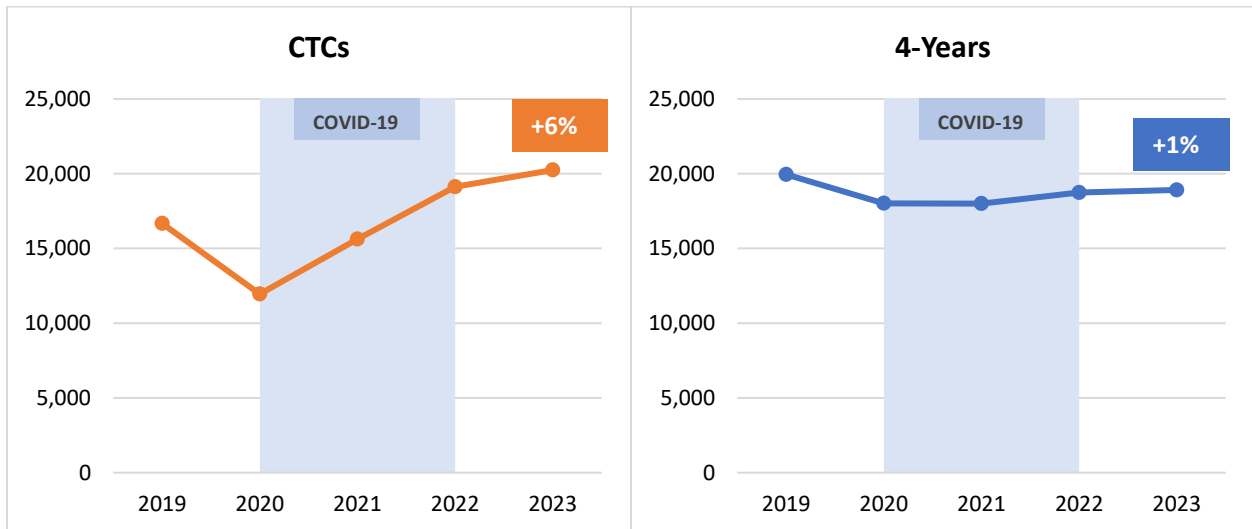
During the pandemic, full-time student enrollment declined more than enrollment for part-time students. In fall 2023, though, enrollment picked up markedly for full-time students at CTCs (7%), while increases were much smaller for part-time students (1%). At 4-year institutions, enrollment declines were smaller for full-time students (-1%) than for part-time students (-7%).



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Enrollment for New Students

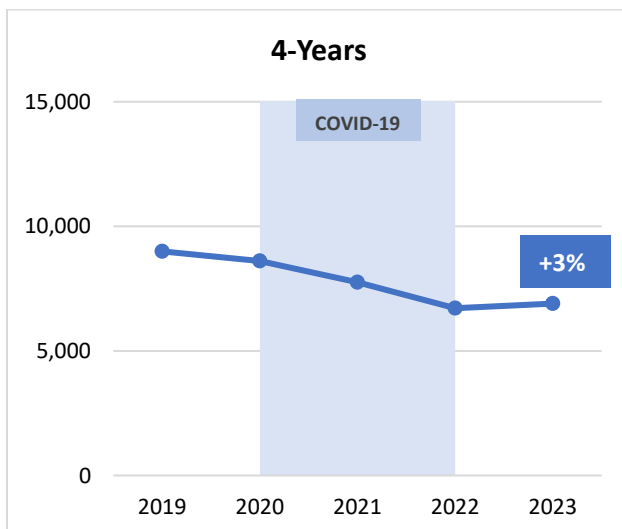
At the beginning of the pandemic, new student enrollment declined across CTCs and public 4-year institutions. At CTCs, new student enrollment quickly rebounded and by fall 2022, it exceeded the pre-pandemic level. Growth continued at a slightly slower pace in fall 2023 when about 20,000 new students enrolled, or 6% more new students than the previous year. At 4-year institutions, the decline in new student enrollment was less severe at the beginning of the pandemic but the rebound has been slower. But in fall 2023 there were nearly 19,000 new students, a 1% increase over fall 2022.



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Enrollment for Transfer Students

The number of students who transferred to 4-year institutions, either from CTCs or different 4-year institutions, fell by 25% during the pandemic. In fall 2023, however, there were about 6,900 new transfer students at public 4-year institutions in the state. Transfer student enrollment increased by 3% from fall 2022, marking the first increase since before the pandemic.



Note: Data labels show the year-over-year change in enrollment in fall 2023 compared to fall 2022.

Discussion

For the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in fall 2023 there was a positive shift in postsecondary enrollment at public institutions in Washington. The increase in enrollment at CTCs and the much lower decline in enrollment at 4-year institutions suggests that we are entering a new phase in the recovery from the pandemic. Likewise, both sectors saw growth in new student enrollment. While new student enrollment remains below the pre-pandemic level at 4-year institutions, new student enrollment at CTCs has surpassed pre-pandemic enrollment. One factor that may be influencing enrollment is the expansion of the Washington College Grant. A higher proportion of students enrolled in both sectors is receiving need-based financial aid now than before the pandemic, an indication of increased eligibility and participation in this important program. This can help make postsecondary education more affordable and accessible for students in Washington.

Despite these first signs of recovery, overall enrollment at public institutions in Washington remains significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels. As we emerge into the post-pandemic era, we have an opportunity to reimagine a supportive postsecondary system that attracts and retains diverse students to help them reach their educational and career goals. Ensuring access to supportive programs like the Washington College Grant can help make enrollment accessible to more Washington residents. Other efforts are also needed to aid students once they are already enrolled. Programs that bolster retention rates and persistence to graduation, including academic and basic needs supports, will continue to be vital for student success. Investment in these types of supports will help the state recover from pandemic-era enrollment declines.

Postsecondary education provides a path to economic mobility for individuals and prosperity for our state. Recovery from the pandemic enrollment slump is critical for helping our state reach its education attainment goals, and investing in programs and policies that support postsecondary enrollment can lead to more opportunities for more Washington residents to reach their potential.