

COVID-19  
**TRANSFER, MOBILITY, AND PROGRESS**  
*Academic Year 2020-2021 Report*



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# COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress

## *Academic Year 2020-2021 Report*

COVID-19 has upended the higher education community. Our ongoing work on tracking transfer enrollment, with [quarterly](#) reports since fall 2020, revealed that pandemic-related disruptions substantially constrained student transfer and mobility in both the fall and spring terms, but they also widened the pre-existing disparities in student mobility, including pathways to bachelor's degree attainment.

As the fifth in the series, this report is the first comprehensive annual reporting designed to assess effects of the pandemic on student transfer during the entire academic year. The report focuses on the 2.1 million undergraduate students who transferred to a college other than their last enrolled institution between July 2020 and June 2021, a period reflecting the pandemic's full-blown impact on postsecondary students and institutions.

Upward transfer pathways have been less affected by the pandemic than all other pathways, showing only a slight decline compared to the double-digit declines in lateral and reverse transfers. In addition, the pandemic academic year widened existing disparities in transfer among student subgroups and different types of institutions. We have identified three areas in which to examine these trends:

First, we focus on upward transfer pathways, showing not only the locus of declines, but also areas of growth, and identifying which four-year colleges, analyzed by selectivity, managed to increase these pathways, and which student populations, analyzed by gender and race and ethnicity, found increased opportunity.

Second, we examine the progression (persistence) of transfer students to the subsequent term after transferring, reporting this early indicator of transfer success by the destination institution type, the academic term of transfer, and demographic characteristics.

Finally, using a greater data coverage of these institutions available through the entire academic year's data, we analyze the transfer enrollment patterns generally and upward transfer enrollment particularly among Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), followed by an analysis of the persistence of students after transferring into these institutions.

We discuss high-level findings in each of the sections. Readers are encouraged to download the [Appendix](#) to view the underlying data tables, and additional breakdowns, in greater detail.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- In the 2020-21 academic year, higher education lost about 191,500 transfer students, nearly three times last year's losses (-69,300). While every pathway of transfer suffered declines, the rate of decline was not the same. Upward transfers, moving from two-year to four-year colleges, held up relatively well, with only about 11,900 student losses (or -1.3%). Pandemic-driven losses were more notable in fall 2020. In fact, upward transfers increased in spring 2021.
- Disparities in upward transfer mobility increased during the pandemic year. Asian and Latinx upward transfers grew (+5.9% and +1.4%, respectively), but Black and Native American upward transfers fell further (-6.1% and -4.1%, respectively) while White students saw a decline consistent with the pre-pandemic rate of drop (-4.4%).
- Only highly selective institutions expanded their total transfer enrollment throughout the entire year, thanks to an unusually large one-year growth in upward transfer (10.3%) across all student groups, irrespective of gender, race and ethnicity, or transferring within states or into different states.

- Patterns of upward transfer mobility along institutional selectivity, gender, and race and ethnicity shifted over the course of the academic year, most notably changing from highly selective colleges leading the growth of upward transfers in fall 2020, to marked increases in Latinx upward transfers in spring 2021 that were more concentrated at *less competitive* institutions.
- As upward transfer inflows grew at highly selective colleges and a few leading primarily online institutions, the persistence rate of transfers to the subsequent term appears to have suffered.
- Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) had substantial transfer student losses this year (-70,400 students, -11.8%), while Historically Black Colleges and Universities remained largely unaffected. Both saw post-transfer persistence rates falling due to the pandemic, except that HSIs made some gains in the latter part of the year. Following national patterns, declines in mobility at these institutions were largely driven by men.

## BY THE NUMBERS

### PANDEMIC ACADEMIC YEAR 2020-2021 (July 2020 – June 2021)

There were approximately 2.1 million transfer students and 11.8 million non-transfer students. Fall transfers accounted for 64% of the total transfer enrollment.

- Transfer enrollment fell by 191,500 students or -8.4%; non-transfer enrollment fell by 456,100 students or -3.7%. The previous year, transfer enrollment dropped 69,300 students or -2.9%.
- All transfer pathways were affected but in different ways:
  - Lateral transfers fell 114,400 or -11.9% (-38,700 or -3.9% the previous year)
    - Between 2-year colleges, -83,600 or -15.2% (-27,600 or -4.8% the previous year)
    - Between 4-year colleges, -30,800 or -7.5% (-11,100 or -2.6% the previous year)
  - Reverse transfers fell 65,200 or -16.2% (-19,200 or -4.5% the previous year)
  - Upward transfers fell 11,900 or -1.3% (-11,400 or -1.2% the previous year)
    - Fall – fell by 15,500 or -2.3% (-5,800 or -0.8% the previous year)
    - Spring – increased by 2,400 or +0.9% (-8,700 or -3.2% the previous year)
  - Lateral transfers account for 60% of the total decline (44% in two-year colleges and 16% in four-year colleges); reverse transfers account for 34%; and upward transfers account for 6%.
- Transfer enrollment fell more for males:
  - Males fell by 112,900 or -12.1% (-37,100 or -3.8% the previous year)
  - Females fell by 76,200 or -5.8% (-32,200 or -2.4% the previous year)
- Black transfer students fell at the sharpest rate of all groups:
  - Whites declined by 86,700 or -9.1% (-59,900 or -5.9% the previous year)
  - Blacks declined by 39,500 or -12.9% (-15,400 or -4.8% the previous year)
  - Latinx declined by 31,900 or -8.4% (+3,300 or +0.9% the previous year)
  - Asians declined by 4,500 or -4.2% (-2,100 or -1.9% the previous year)
  - Native Americans declined by 1,900 or -9.9% (-1,000 or -4.9% the previous year)
- 2.2 million spring 2020 enrollees stopped out in fall 2020, showing a marked one-year increase due to the pandemic. Stop-outs were on the decline pre-pandemic.
  - One-year change overall: +108,200 or +5.2% over last year (-46,000 or -2.2% the previous year)
  - White (37% as a share): +11,400 or +1.4% (-29,700 or -3.6% the previous year)
  - Black (13%): -3,300 or -1.1% (-12,000 or -3.9% the previous year)
  - Latinx (18%): +43,600 or +12.0% (+1,500 or +0.4% the previous year)
  - Asian (4%): +5,100 or +6.8% (-1,700 or -2.3% the previous year)
  - Native American (1%): +1,500 or +7.7% (-1,100 or -5.7% the previous year)

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## AY 2020-2021 YEAR IN REVIEW

In the 2020-2021 academic year, both reverse and lateral transfer pathways suffered double-digit drops, but upward transfer held up relatively well. This is attributable to an unusually high number of two-year college students moving to highly selective four-year institutions during the pandemic, irrespective of gender, race and ethnicity, or transferring within states or into different states.

Across the pandemic academic year '20-'21, both reverse and lateral transfer pathways suffered double digit drops (-16.2% and -11.9%, respectively) while upward transfer held up relatively well. The number of students transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution declined by 1.3 percent over the past year. This decline in upward transfer enrollment was driven by males, who fell by 4.4 percent (-16,242), more than 2.5 times the previous year's decline (-6,257, -1.7%). Female upward transfers grew marginally (+3,256, +0.6%), reversing their pre-pandemic decline (-5,641, -1%). Only Asian and Latinx students saw an increase in upward transfer enrollment this year (+2,994, +5.9% for Asian and +2,280, +1.4% for Latinx students), but for Asian students, this was a reversal from pre-pandemic declines, while the growth among Latinx students was smaller than the previous year's (see Appendix). In contrast, Black and Native American students saw steeper declines (-6,132, -6.1% and -305, -4.1% respectively) compared to last year. White students also saw declines (-17,525, -4.4%), but the declines were on par with pre-pandemic levels.

Upward transfer enrollment at highly selective institutions fared far better during the pandemic academic year. Students transferring into highly selective institutions grew 10.3 percent (+7,647; see Appendix), a substantial increase compared to little growth the previous year. In contrast, upward transfer enrollment remained stable at *very competitive* institutions and dropped substantially at *competitive* and *less competitive* institutions (-14,581 or -3.5% and -4,636 or -4.4%, respectively). Note: "highly selective" refers to the combined categories of *most competitive* and *highly competitive* in the Barron's selectivity index of approximately 200 top selective colleges (see methodological notes for details).

Both male and female upward transfers to highly selective institutions increased during the pandemic academic year (+4,585 or +12.2% for females and +2,459 or +7.1% for males), in stark contrast to little growth in the previous year. Students transferring to a highly selective institution also increased across all racial and ethnic categories (see Appendix). Asian students saw the largest rate change, increasing 18.3 percent (+1,490 students), nearly 8 times the rate of growth the previous year (+183, +2.3%). Black and Latinx students had substantial growth this academic year (+8.7% and +8.2%, respectively), reversing pre-pandemic declines. White students also saw a 6 percent growth (+1,946 students), with the largest numerical growth compared to all other racial and ethnic categories.

Students transferring into highly selective institutions grew for both transferring within states and into different states—from their last enrolled institution (see Appendix). Out-of-state transfers to highly selective institutions grew at a rate three times the rate of in-state counterparts during this academic year (see Appendix). Additionally, for *very competitive* institutions, out-of-state transfers grew (+2,368, +7.5%) while in-state transfers declined (-1,869, -1.4%).

Students who transferred from any two-year institution into a four-year primarily online institution (POI) grew from the previous academic year (+660, +0.6%), though these enrollment trends reflect a smaller growth compared to the previous academic year, where there was a 1.2 percent growth in upward transfer enrollment at POIs (+1,437 students).

### SECTION 1. UPWARD TRANSFER

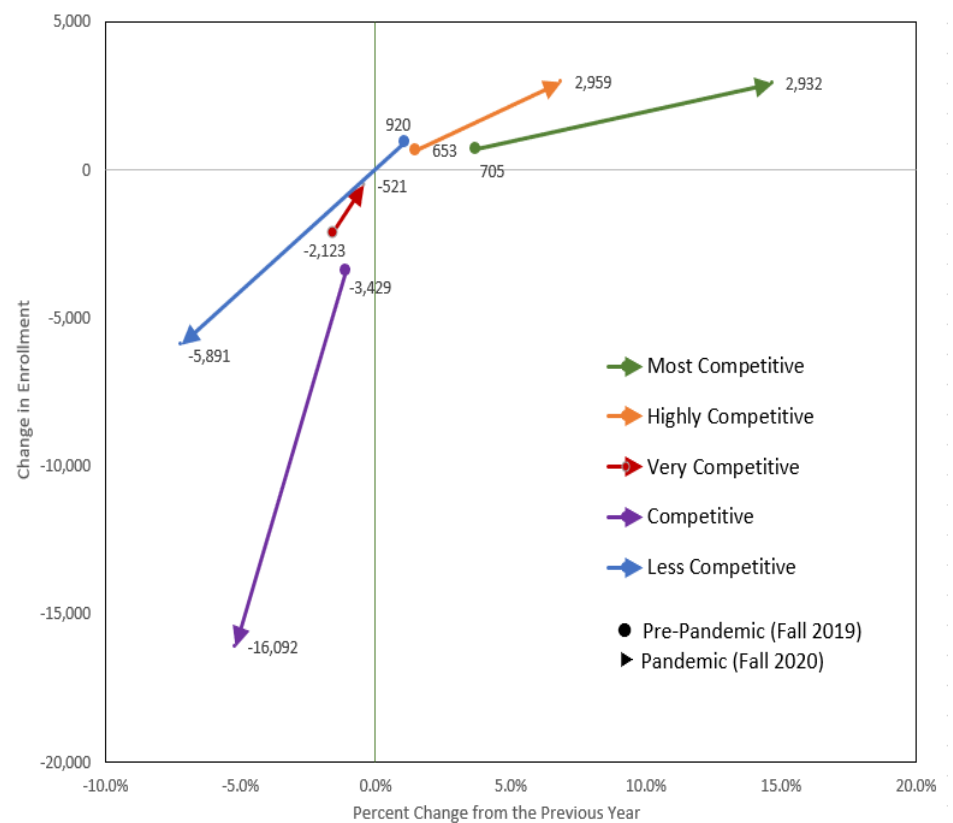
Patterns of upward transfer mobility along institutional selectivity and race and ethnicity shifted over the course of the academic year. During fall 2020, only highly selective colleges expanded their transfer enrollment thanks to a 9.4 percent increase in upward transfer enrollment. Asian and White students had the largest numerical increases, followed by Latinx and Black students, but there was no growth among Native American students. Upward transfer into a few leading primarily online institutions also grew in fall 2020 for both men and women.

Between the start of the pandemic academic year and the mid-year, there were two notable trends indicative of growing inequities. One is that upward transfer enrollment decreased in the first half of the pandemic academic year across the board, except for students moving to highly selective colleges and universities or primarily online institutions where more than 90 percent of students enroll exclusively online prior to the pandemic. The other is that as the pandemic dragged on, the growth of upward transfer also occurred in other institutions in spring 2021, exposing greater inequities for students of color. In the sections that follow, we discuss in depth how the passage of time changed the upward transfer mobility trend and the implications for equity.

Mirroring the overall academic year's trends, upward transfer enrollment declined across the board except for students transferring into highly selective institutions in fall 2020 (see **Figure 1**). Highly selective institutions saw a 9.4 percent growth in upward transfers (+5,891 students), 4.2 times larger than the growth rate in fall 2019 (+1,358, +2.2%). Meanwhile there were steep declines in upward transfer enrollment among *competitive* (-16,092, -5.2%) and *less competitive* (-5,891, -7.2%) institutions compared to the previous fall. As a result, disparities grew along institutional selectivity. As Figure 1 shows, year-over-year changes varied more widely across different selectivity categories in fall 2020 (ranging -7% to +15%, compared with -2% to +4% in fall 2019).

In the beginning of the pandemic academic year, only the most competitive and highly competitive colleges expanded their upward transfer enrollment while competitive and less competitive colleges fell further behind, widening disparities along institutional selectivity. Year-over-year changes varied more across selectivity categories in fall 2020 (ranging -7% to +15, versus -2% to +4% in fall 2019).

Figure 1. Year-Over-Year Change in Fall Upward Transfers by Institutional Selectivity

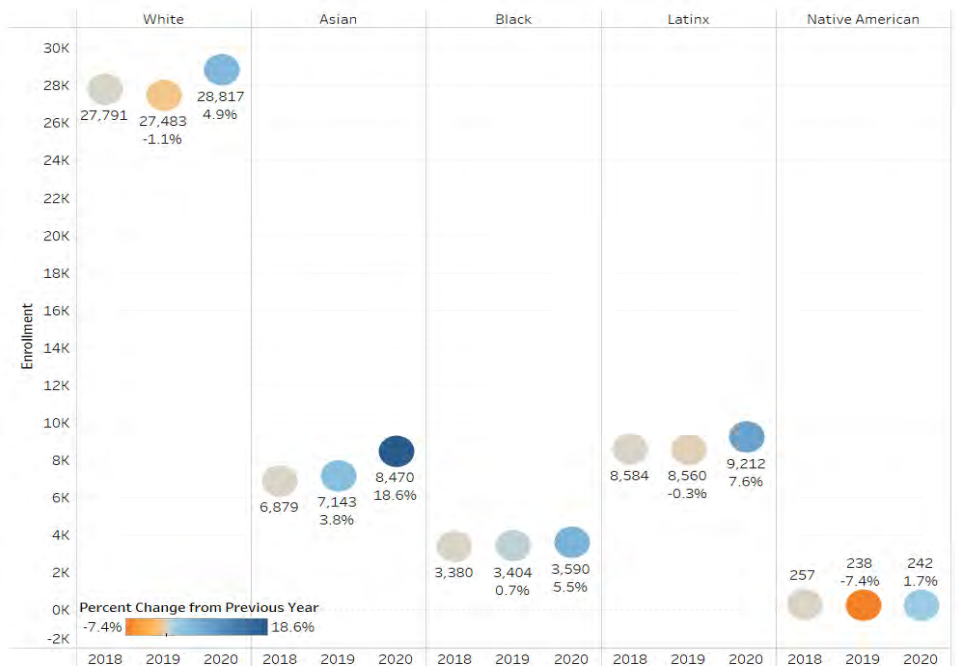


Note: The term “Highly Selective Institutions” we use throughout the report refers to the top two categories combined, *Most Competitive* and *Highly Competitive* according to the Barron’s selectivity index. All selectivity categories are italicized when cited in the report for ease of reference.

Across racial and ethnic lines at highly selective institutions (see **Figure 2**), Asian and White students saw the most growth (+1,327, +18.6% for Asians and +1,334, +4.9% for Whites). Black and Latinx enrollment also increased, and at a higher rate than Whites, though the growth was smaller numerically compared to their White and Asian counterparts (+186, +5.5% for Blacks and +652, +7.6% for Latinx). Notably, there was virtually no growth among Native American upward transfer enrollment (+4, +1.7%).

At highly selective institutions, fall upward transfers increased in all racial and ethnic categories except Native American students, who had virtually no growth.

Figure 2. Fall Upward Transfers at Highly Selective Institutions by Race and Ethnicity

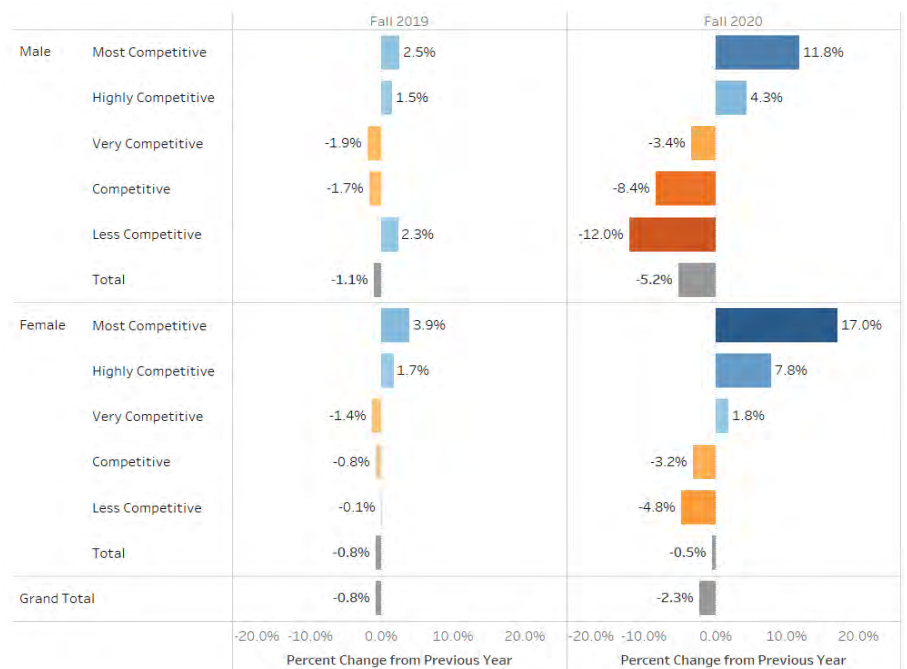


Note: The term “Highly Selective Institutions” refers to the top two categories combined, *Most Competitive* and *Highly Competitive* according to the Barron’s selectivity index.

Both female and male students saw declines in upward transfer enrollment this fall compared to the previous fall (see **Figure 3**). However, the rate of decline differed for males and females with female transfers seeing little change from the previous fall, while male transfers declined nearly five times more than the previous fall’s upward transfer decline. The decline among male transfers was driven by sharp decreases at *competitive* (-10,546, -8.4%) and *less competitive* institutions (-3,620, -12%). Only highly selective institutions saw growth for both male (+1,907, +6.6%) and female (+3,457, +10.7%) transfers, and both grew at rates far exceeding their pre-pandemic levels of growth.

Gender gaps in fall upward transfer mobility widened along institutional selectivity. In stark contrast to the previous fall for both men and women, the pandemic accelerated the growth of upward transfer at most competitive and highly competitive institutions while furthering the declines for competitive and less competitive institutions. Gender disparity within selectivity category also increased from the previous fall.

Figure 3. Change in Fall Upward Transfers by Gender and Institutional Selectivity



Note: The term “Highly Selective Institutions” refers to the top two categories combined, *Most Competitive* and *Highly Competitive* according to the Barron’s selectivity index.

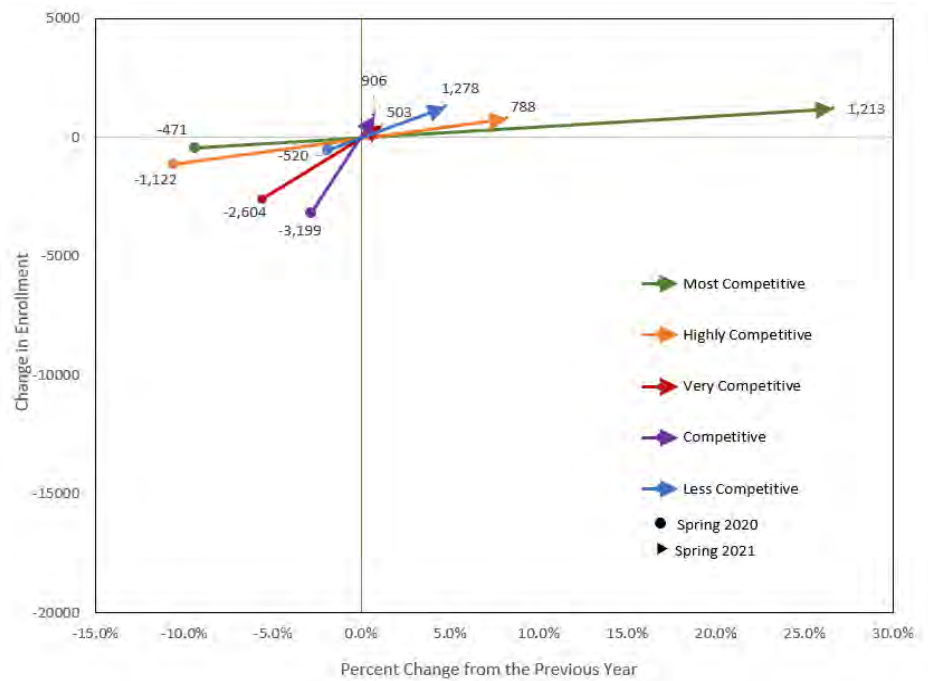
During the pandemic academic year, upward transfer enrollment into primarily online institutions (POIs) increased marginally (+0.6%), compared with the previous year (+1.2%). Most of this year's growth occurred in the fall (+2.1%, +1,472 students), which was offset by a decline in the subsequent spring. The growth was driven by a few leading POIs that are private nonprofit four-year institutions (+1,542, +5.6%) or public four-year institutions (+465, +8.8%). Notably, private for-profit POIs, the most common POI sector, saw declines in fall 2020 over the previous fall (-535, -1.4%). Both male and female students saw an increase of upward transfer enrollment into POIs in fall 2020 (see Appendix).

**In spring 2021, White upward transfers grew at highly selective and very competitive colleges whereas Latinx students, with the largest growth in spring upward transfers, were concentrated at less competitive colleges.**

Divergent upward transfer patterns emerged in spring along selectivity, gender, and racial and ethnic lines. The number of upward transfer students moving to highly selective four-year colleges grew in spring 2021 (+2,001, +14.3% compared with the previous spring; see **Figure 4**), reversing the pre-pandemic declines (-1,593, -10.2%). In contrast to fall 2020, the growth of upward transfers is widespread across nearly all selectivity categories. *Less competitive* institutions in particular grew this spring, compared to declines in fall 2020.

In contrast to fall 2020, the growth of spring upward transfers is more widespread across most selectivity categories, although most competitive and highly competitive institutions grew more substantially (8.3% and higher) than very competitive, competitive, and less competitive institutions (+0.8% to +4.8%).

**Figure 4. Year-Over-Year Change in Spring Upward Transfers by Institutional Selectivity**

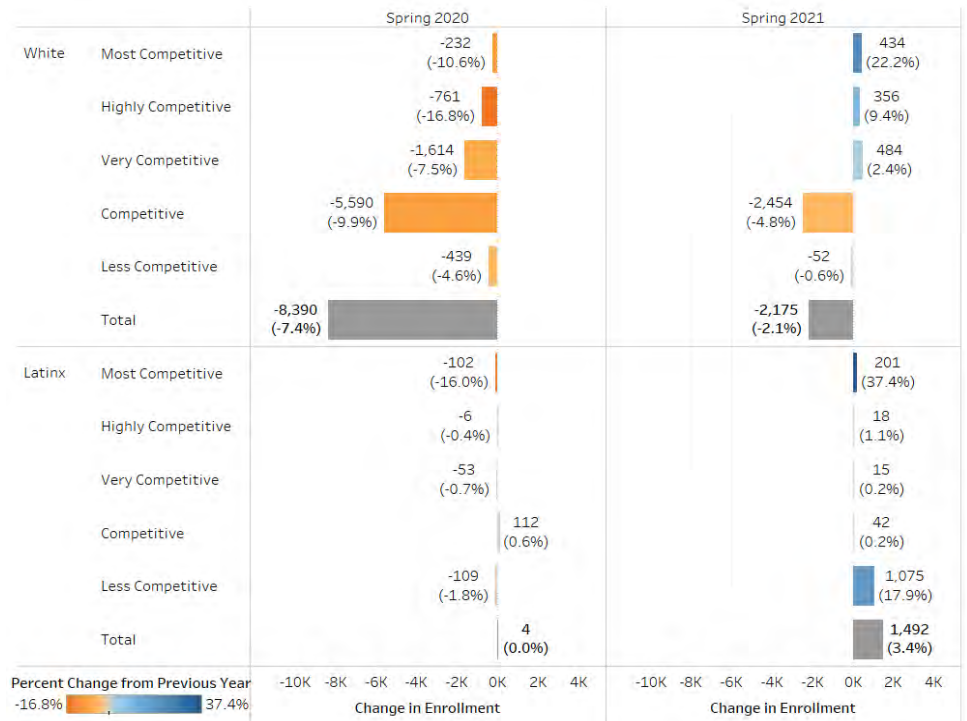


At highly selective colleges, upward transfer students from every racial and ethnic background reversed their pre-pandemic declines and recorded growth this spring (see Appendix). However, White students drove that growth at these institutions (+790, +13.8%). It is also important to note that White upward transfers increased at highly selective and *very competitive* colleges (see **Figure 5**). In contrast, for Latinx students, who had the largest growth of all racial and ethnic groups in spring upward transfers, the growth was concentrated in *less competitive* institutions (+1,075, +17.9%; see **Figure 5** for the contrast in the growth of upward transfers along selectivity between White and Latinx students).

Diverging from the fall 2020 trend, women had marked increases in upward transfer enrollment this spring (+5,090, +3.3%) while their male counterparts continued a path of decline (-3,046, -2.9%; see **Figure 6**, in comparison with **Figure 3**). Gender differences are more conspicuous along institutional selectivity. Highly selective institutions continued to enroll both men and women upward transfers at higher rates compared to pre-pandemic levels, but women grew two times more than men (+1,267, +18.6% for women; +647, +9.4% for men). Additionally, only women saw growth this spring in upward transfer enrollment among *very competitive*, *competitive*, and *less competitive* institutions—a reversal of pre-pandemic patterns. Male students, in keeping with pre-pandemic trends, saw declines among these institutions.

Latinx students led the growth in upward transfers this spring, and this growth was concentrated at less competitive institutions. In contrast, Whites only increased at most competitive, highly competitive, or very competitive institutions.

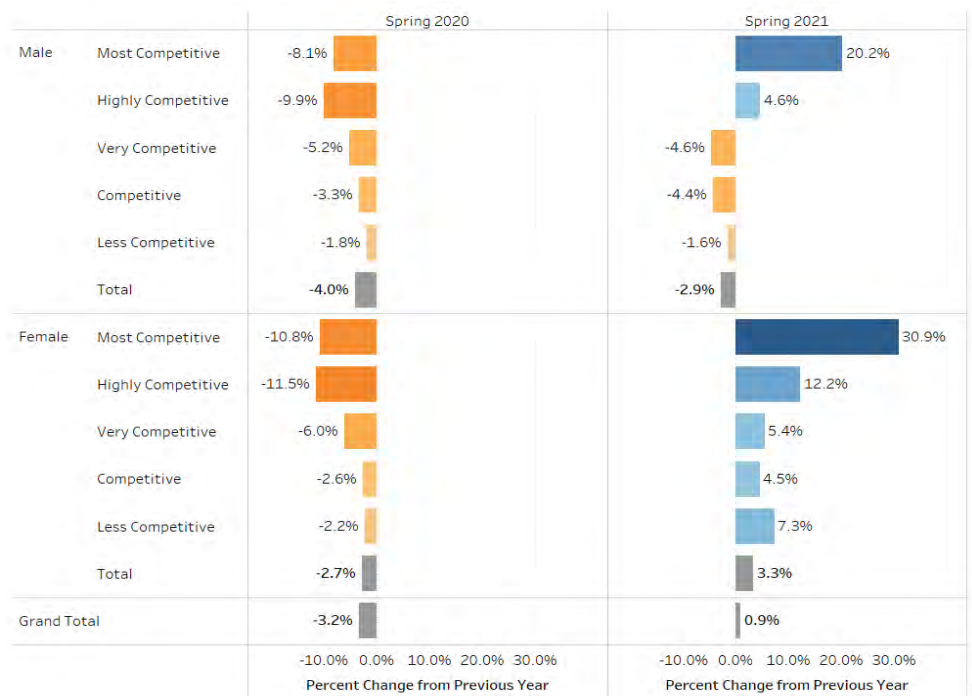
Figure 5. Change in Spring Upward Transfers by Institution Selectivity: White and Latinx Students



In contrast to fall 2020 patterns, students transferring into a POI decreased this spring compared to the previous spring (-999, -2%). This decline is a reversal from the previous spring, where upward transfer enrollment into POIs increased 3.1 percent (1,506 students). The declines in spring 2021 occurred primarily among private for-profit institutions (-3,540, -12.6%), and public four-year institutions (-282, -7.2%). However, upward transfer enrollment into private nonprofit institutions was the only sector to see growth this spring, increasing 16.3 percent from the previous spring (+2,823 students). Whereas upward transfer enrollment in the fall saw growth for both male and female students, only male students saw an increase in upward transfer enrollment this spring (+492, +3%), whereas there were declines among female transfers (-1,376, -4.3%).

Women made notable gains in upward transfer enrollment this spring (+3.3%) while their male counterparts continued a path of decline (-2.9%). During the pandemic, gender gaps widened along institutional selectivity.

Figure 6. Change in Spring Upward Transfers by Gender and Selectivity Category





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## SECTION 2. PERSISTENCE AFTER TRANSFER

While national persistence rates dropped marginally, subgroup disparities revealed disproportionately large impacts during the initial phase of the pandemic.

By the start of fall 2020, 29.6 percent of the roughly 860,000 spring transfer students, including not just upward transfer but all pathways combined, were no longer enrolled. This represents an overall term-to-term persistence rate of 70.4 percent for students who had transferred shortly before or immediately after the pandemic began (Figures 7a and 7b). Persistence rate accounts for transfer students who either re-enrolled in the following term at any U.S. institution, or those who attained a credential during the term of transfer. Despite early predictions that the pandemic would disrupt continuing enrollment, the national persistence rate post-transfer dropped slightly from pre-pandemic levels. Likewise, the mid-year term-to-term national persistence rate appears unaffected by the resurgence of the virus late last year: among those who transferred in fall 2020, approximately 1.4 million students, 19.3 percent stopped out in spring 2021, for an overall persistence rate of 80.7 percent (Figures 8a and 8b). Although the magnitude of pandemic-driven decline is still small, these national persistence rates mask subgroup disparities, often disguising disproportionately large impacts from the initial phase of the pandemic.

In the recent past, both male and female transfer students had maintained stable persistence rates year over year (see Appendix). With the start of the pandemic, however, post-transfer persistence rates entered a downward path only for male students, with their rate dropping precipitously at the start of the pandemic academic year (-1.6 pp in fall 2020 and -0.5 pp in spring 2021).

The persistence rate dipped for White, Black, Latinx, and Native American transfer students nationally (Figure 7a). These drops were driven by 18- to 20-year-old students (see Appendix). Pandemic-related declines occurred almost exclusively in community colleges and private nonprofit four-year institutions, especially among Latinx and Native American transfer students enrolled in community colleges, as well as Black transfers into private nonprofit four-year institutions (Figures 7a and 7b).

The pandemic's impacts appear more widespread across institution sectors by mid-year (Figures 8a and 8b). All students transferring into public colleges during fall 2020 saw almost equal levels of persistence rate drops by the subsequent spring, with the exceptions of Asian transfers at both public four-year and two-year institutions and Native American transfers at community colleges. Notably, the Latinx persistence rates dropped more relative to other transfer students into public institutions, but at for-profit four-year institutions, Latinx students continued to make gains, persisting at the 2nd highest rate after Asian transfers. Their relative gains in this sector persisted through the entire academic year.

In terms of the persistence of upward transfer students, as more upward transfers moved to primarily online institutions and highly selective colleges during spring 2020 and fall 2020, their persistence rates to the subsequent term appear to have suffered in both institution types. At POIs, the persistence rate fell 1.3 pp to 66.2 percent for the spring 2020 upward transfers following their pre-pandemic progress of +1.7 pp, and the same downward trend continued mid-year (-1.3 pp in spring 2021; see Appendix). Highly selective colleges, on the other hand, saw relatively larger pandemic-driven drops in persistence rate at the start of the year (-0.9 pp versus -0.4 pp mid-year; see Appendix). Furthermore, male upward transfers into selective colleges persisted at a rate that equals or exceeds the female persistence rate prior to the pandemic but the male persistence rate began to lag in fall 2020 (see Appendix).

At the start of the pandemic academic year, persistence rate drops occurred almost exclusively in community colleges and private nonprofit four-year institutions.

Figure 7a. Persistence Rate of Spring Transfers to the Subsequent Term: Public Institutions



Note: "National" includes all types of institutions. "All" includes other race and ethnicity groups as well as unknown/missing which are not shown.

Figure 7b. Persistence Rate of Spring Transfers to the Subsequent Term: Private Institutions



Note: "National" includes all types of institutions. "All" includes other race and ethnicity groups as well as unknown/missing which are not shown.

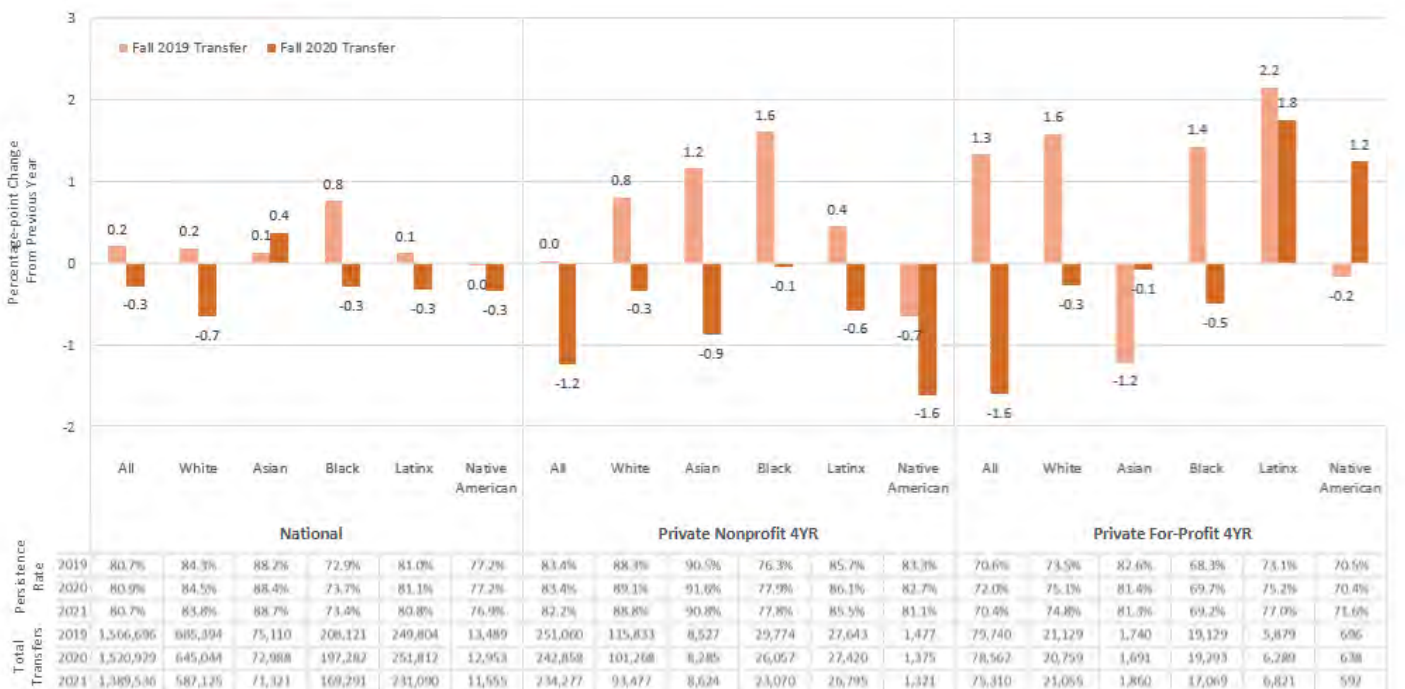
The pandemic's impacts appear more widespread across all public institutions by mid-year, with almost equal levels of persistence rate drops occurring for most racial and ethnic groups in public institutions.

Figure 8a. Persistence Rate of Fall Transfers to the Subsequent Term: Public Institutions



Note: "National" includes all types of institutions. "All" includes other race and ethnicity groups as well as unknown/missing which are not shown.

Figure 8b. Persistence Rate of Fall Transfers to the Subsequent Term: Private Institutions



Note: "National" includes all types of institutions. "All" includes other race and ethnicity groups as well as unknown/missing which are not shown.

## SECTION 3. HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

While transfer enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) remained largely unaffected in the pandemic academic year, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) suffered a large transfer enrollment decline (-70,400 students, -11.8%). Both saw post-transfer persistence rates falling during the pandemic, except that HSIs made some gains in the latter part of the year (+0.8 pp). Following national patterns, declines in mobility at these institutions were largely driven by men.

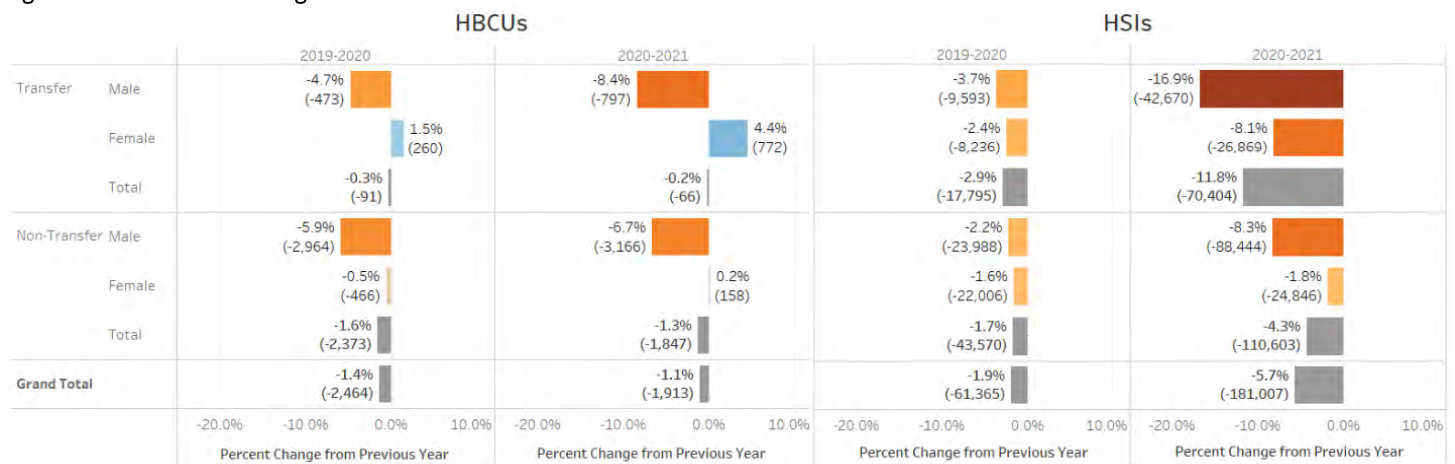
### Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Overall enrollment at HBCUs fell 1.1 percent (-1,913) in the 2020-21 academic year, continuing the downward trend from the previous year (Figure 9). The declines were driven by non-transfer students (-1,847, -1.3%) particularly among male students, while students transferring into HBCUs remained stable (-0.2%). The declines in both non-transfer and transfer enrollments were slightly less than their pre-pandemic declines. This suggests little enrollment impacts from the pandemic among transfer and non-transfer students at HBCUs. Upward transfers into HBCUs increased 5.5 percent (+845; see Appendix) in the pandemic year following little change in the previous academic year (-0.3%, -46), although this year's growth was driven by a single institution.

The pandemic appears to have had adverse effects on the progression of students after transfer throughout the academic year, but more evidently at the start of the year (-1.5 pp compared to -0.3 pp mid-year). Among the 9,243 students who had transferred into an HBCU in spring 2020, 75 percent returned in fall 2020, down 1.5 pp from the prior year, a reversal of the pre-pandemic increase of 1.7 pp (see Figure 10). The persistence rate of the 17,607 fall 2020 transfers to spring 2021 also saw a reversal of the pre-pandemic trend, having slipped 0.3 pp to 83.8 percent following a gain of 0.5 pp in the year prior. It is important to note that male transfer students are primarily responsible for the pandemic-driven persistence rate drops at HBCUs throughout the year.

### Transfer enrollment declines were more pronounced at HSIs than at HBCUs during the pandemic.

Figure 9. Year-Over-Year Change in Transfer and Non-Transfer Enrollments at HBCUs and HSIs



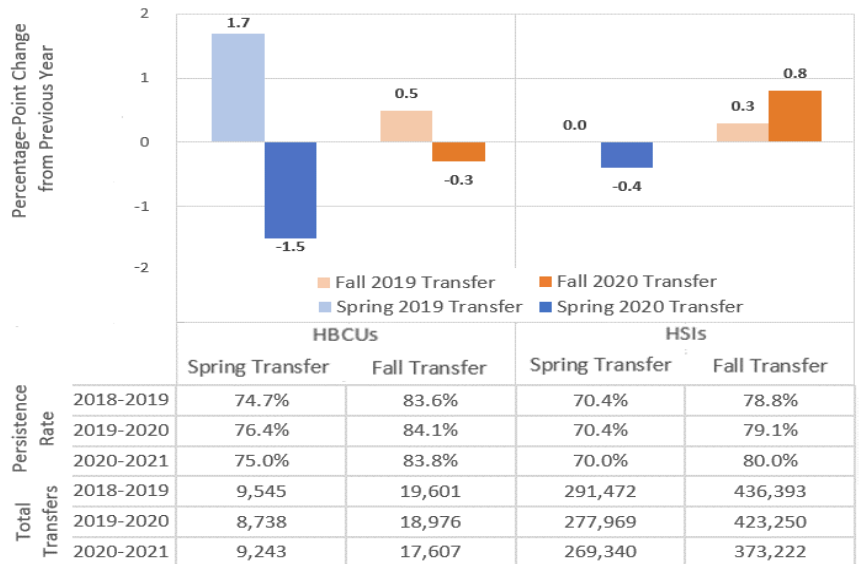
Note: Freshmen and undergraduates with prior bachelor's degrees are not included in this figure (see the Methodological Notes for details).

### Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)

HSIs this academic year faced enrollment losses nearly three times as steep as last year's (-181,007 versus -61,365; see Figure 9). HSIs saw accelerated pandemic declines for both transfer enrollment and, to a lesser extent, non-transfer enrollment, having dropped 11.8 percent (-70,404) and 4.3 percent (-110,603), respectively. Last year, their corresponding losses were far smaller especially among transfers (-17,795 and -43,570, respectively). Following national trends, male enrollment declined more than female enrollment for both transfer and non-transfer populations, though both men and women declined more during the pandemic (Figure 9).

Persistence rate of transfers fell at the start of the year but improved by mid-year at HSIs.

Figure 10. Persistence Rate of Transfers to the Subsequent Term at HBCUs and HSIs



The rate at which students transferring into HSIs in spring 2020 persisted to fall 2020 slipped 0.4 pp to 70 percent, after remaining stable prior to the pandemic (see Figure 10). This decline was driven by male transfers (-2.2 pp, as opposed to +1.1 pp for females). In contrast, the mid-year persistence rate for fall 2020 transfer students increased by 0.8 pp following a gain of 0.3 pp in the year prior.

Across the pandemic academic year, HSIs experienced a small decline (-678) in upward transfer enrollment following a 0.6 percent increase in the prior year (+1,117; see Appendix). However, the patterns shifted over the course of the academic year. While experiencing slight declines in fall 2020, HSIs had marked increases in upward transfer enrollment in spring 2021, reversing their pre-pandemic trends in both terms. Specifically, upward transfers at HSIs fell last fall (-646, -0.4%) after increasing in the prior fall (+1,607, +1%). This decline was entirely due to men (-4.2% as opposed to +1.6% for women; see Appendix). In contrast, spring 2021 upward transfers grew 1.5 percent (+844) due to a 5.5-percent increase among women (men decreased by 5.1%) following a nearly 4 percent drop for both men and women in the prior spring.

With a growing number of upward transfers entering a HSI, the persistence rate tends to decline. Fall 2020 upward transfers into a HSI persisted to spring 2021 at a lower rate compared to the pre-pandemic year (-1.1 pp vs. -0.2 pp; see Appendix). However, this persistence rate remained stable (-0.1 pp) when upward transfer did not increase among spring 2020 transfers.

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

A year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects on the higher education community are clearer. This report built upon findings from investigating transfer and mobility over the past year by looking at transfer enrollment patterns across the entire academic year 2020-21, with a focus on upward transfer, persistence post-transfer, and minority-serving institutions (HBCUs and HSIs).

Upward transfer enrollment as a whole declined 1.3 percent or 11,900 students this academic year, consistent with the pre-pandemic levels of decline. But approximately 200 highly selective institutions bucked that trend, growing at a double-digit rate (+10.3%), a significant jump in access to quality baccalaureate degree attainment for students starting at two-year colleges, predominantly low-income, racial and ethnic minority students. However, looking across the academic year doesn't tell the whole story. Transfer patterns shifted over the course of the academic year, exposing

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greater inequities between those who were able to take advantage of upward transfer mobility and those who fell further behind as the pandemic dragged on.

Across institutional selectivity, the pandemic accelerated the growth of fall upward transfers at *most competitive* and *highly competitive* institutions while furthering the declines for *competitive* and *less competitive* institutions. The pandemic also widened the gender disparity within each selectivity category from the previous fall, with male upward students growing at only half the rate of females at selective institutions and declining by twice the rate of females at less selective institutions. The gender disparity grew wider by mid-year, with women demonstrating marked increases in spring upward transfer into highly selective institutions (+1,267, +18.6% for women and +647, +9.4% for men). Women upward transfers also increased this spring at *very competitive*, *competitive*, and *less competitive* institutions, while male numbers declined at these institutions.

Across racial and ethnic lines, White and Asian students saw the largest numerical growth in fall upward transfer into highly selective institutions, leaving other groups further behind. In spring 2021, upward transfers grew more widely across other selective categories and a new racial and ethnic divide emerged: While White upward transfers continued to rise at highly selective colleges, for Latinx students, who had the highest upward transfer growth of the spring, their growth was heavily concentrated at *less competitive* institutions.

Despite early predictions that the pandemic would disrupt continuing enrollment, no significant persistence rate drops were found among transfer students. Our measure of one-term persistence revealed marginal declines during the pandemic (all transfer pathways combined). The persistence rate for upward transfer students at highly selective institutions fell more steeply, however, by 0.9 pp at the start of the pandemic year and continued to decline at mid-year. The magnitude of decline is still small but should be watched closely as a possible early signal of over-reaching. Primarily online institutions also saw the persistence rates of their upward transfer students falling at the start of the pandemic year (-1.3 pp).

Across the pandemic academic year, transfer enrollment remained largely unaffected at HBCUs whereas HSIs saw a steep transfer enrollment decline from the previous year (-70,400, -11.8%). Diverging patterns continued regarding the one-term persistence rate. For students transferring into a HBCU, pandemic-related persistence rate drops occurred throughout the year, whereas some gains were observed for HSIs at mid-year (+0.8 pp over last spring). However, given a marked growth in spring 2021 upward transfers into HSIs and an increased clustering of Latinx upward transfers within less selective institutions including many HSIs, our findings raise the alarm about post-transfer persistence and completion for Latinx students during the pandemic.

This academic year reporting presents some bright spots for higher education, most notably the growing upward transfer students into highly selective four-year colleges. But the gaps in transfer and persistence outcomes across different student demographics and institution sectors are concerning. From the start of AY 2020-21, a growing number of two-year college students have transferred to selective colleges and a few leading primarily online institutions but fewer of them remained enrolled in the subsequent term, suggesting that some of the gains in attainment may be delayed, or negligible. Also notable is that students transferring into a HBCU or a HSI showed diverging enrollment and persistence patterns in the pandemic year. How these enrollment and transfer patterns continue to persist or diverge going into the upcoming academic year remains to be seen, though we expect that as the pandemic continues, there will likely be further divergences among students, deepening the longstanding concerns over disparities in student mobility and progress toward baccalaureate degree attainment.

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## 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 academic year's data (AY2020-2021) and the two previous academic years (AY2018-2019 and AY2019-2020) as pre-pandemic baselines. The undergraduate population is further disaggregated by various subgroups of students, programs, institutions, states, or regions.

Data analyzed in this report represents student transfer pathways across 91 percent of the Clearinghouse universe of institutions reported as of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. It focuses on full academic year enrollment changes based on the same institutions' reporting as of June 3<sup>rd</sup> each year across three comparison years.

### 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 our standard Transfer and Mobility reports, where enrollment rates are weighted by data coverage rates, the *COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress* series uses unweighted data. This is because the emphasis of this series is on academic 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 institutional submission variability as well as variations in data submission dates. Only institutions that submitted enrollment data in 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2020-2021 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 data that was submitted within the data submission window (specified in Term Definitions below) in each of the three academic years was included. The panel includes 91 percent of institutions that report to the Clearinghouse. 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.

### TERM DEFINITIONS

Spring term, fall term, and academic year are defined as follows:

- Fall term: 7/1-12/31
- Spring term: 1/1-4/30
- Academic year: 7/1-6/30 (submission window: 7/1-6/3)

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

In light of the pandemic and its possibly negative consequences on data reporting, we investigate a very inclusive subset of the student population to reliably estimate any effects from the pandemic on transfer patterns. As a result, some of the definitions and identification methods differ from our quarterly reporting.

#### *Undergraduate Student Population*

This study includes all degree-seeking students who had a valid enrollment at a Title IV, degree-granting institution in the U.S., reported as of June 3<sup>rd</sup> in the specified years. Having a valid enrollment record means that a student is enrolled on a full-time or part-time basis (see "Enrollment Intensity" below for more details). 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. For the first time, we also investigated students enrolled in a particular term who did or did not enroll in the subsequent term.

1. Freshmen or first-time students are identified as such:
  - a. Students who were first-time during a fall term had no enrollment records or degree/certificate awards at Title IV U.S. institutions prior to the fall of the applicable year unless the previous enrollment record was before the student turned 17.5 years old or before the student graduated from high school (prior dual enrollment).
  - b. Students who were first-time during a spring term 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 records were before the student turned 18 years old or before the student graduated from high school (prior dual enrollment).

2. Continuing spring students are those students who had at least one valid enrollment in the last fall term prior to their spring enrollment. Continuing fall students are those students who had at least one valid enrollment in the same year prior to their fall enrollment, including summer enrollment.
3. Returning spring students are those students who returned after a stop-out of at least one term. Returning fall students are those students who returned after a stop-out and were therefore not enrolled in the same year prior to their fall enrollment, including summer enrollment. Any length of stop-out was considered for this analysis.
4. If a student had an enrollment record for a given term but did not have an enrollment record the following term, and the student did not have a credential earned by that term, then we classified that student as non-enrolled. If a student had an enrollment record for a given term but not the next term, but the student earned a credential during the term they were enrolled, then we classified that student as “not enrolled, because the student graduated.” Otherwise, if a student was enrolled for both a given term and the next term, we considered the student enrolled.

#### *Defining Transfer*

We define students as transfer students if they previously were enrolled at a Title IV, degree-granting institution and subsequently enrolled in another Title IV, degree-granting institution the following term. 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 *continuing* or *returning* categories:

1. Continuing spring 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. Continuing fall transfer students are those who had at least one valid enrollment record in the last spring or summer term and enrolled in fall at an institution different than their last enrolled institution.
2. Returning spring transfer students are those who had previously enrolled in postsecondary education but had stopped out up until a later enrolled spring, and re-enrolled that spring at an institution different than their last enrolled institution. Returning fall transfer students are those who had previously enrolled in postsecondary education but had stopped out up until a later enrolled fall, and re-enrolled that fall at an institution different than their last enrolled institution. Any length of stop-out was considered for this analysis.
3. Non-transfer students are either continuing or returning students defined as above who enrolled at the same institution as their last enrolled institution. The same logic is applied to academic years 2018-'19 and 2019-'20 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 transferred 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 transferred from a four-year to a two-year institution.
3. Lateral transfer: Students who either transferred from a two-year to a two-year institution or from a four-year to a four-year institution.

#### *Persistence Rate of Transfer Students*

The persistence rate post-transfer is determined by a student's first valid enrollment record in the subsequent term at *any* U.S. institution after the change of institution is identified. Having a valid enrollment record means that a student is enrolled on a full-time or part-time basis (see “Enrollment Intensity” below for more details).

1. *For students enrolled in a spring term:* If a student enrolled in the spring term as a transfer student, and then enrolled the following fall anywhere in the U.S., or graduated with a credential that spring, they were defined as persisted to the fall term. The persistence rate of transfer students to the following fall term is the number of students who persisted to the fall term divided by the number of spring's transfer students.
2. *For students enrolled in a fall term:* If a student was a transfer student in the fall term and then enrolled the following spring term anywhere in the U.S., or graduated with a credential that fall, they were defined as persisted to the spring term. The persistence rate of transfer students to the following spring term is the number of students who persisted into the spring term divided by the number of fall's transfer students.

#### **ENROLLMENT INTENSITY**

Enrollment Intensity is defined as whether a student is full-time or part-time at the start of the term. A student's enrollment intensity is reported by the institution based on their own predetermined thresholds for what is considered full-time or part-time enrollment. To seamlessly define part-time, if an institution reported a student as either  $\frac{3}{4}$ -time, half time, or less than half time, then the student was defined as part-time for this report.

#### **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 22 percent of all undergraduates for the academic year and 18.4 percent of all transfer students analyzed in this analysis for the academic year. 0.8 percent more transfer students are missing or



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unknown on race and ethnicity this academic year (as of June 3rd) compared with the previous year.

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

Transfers are considered in-state if both institutions (of current enrollment and previous enrollment) are in the same state, and 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.

### INSTITUTIONAL SELECTIVITY INDEX

The [Barron's Selectivity index](#) evaluates the competitiveness of an institution based on several admissions factors such as an institution's acceptance rate, SAT score, high school GPA, and high school class rank. Utilizing the 2016 Barron's selectivity list, the ranking categories are as follows:

1. Most Competitive – Institutions that generally admit less than a third of their total applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally have a high school class rank in the top 10-20 percent of their graduating class, and high school grade averages from A to B+. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 80<sup>th</sup> percentile. Out of the total 104 institutions in this category, 92% are included in this analysis.
2. Highly Competitive – Institutions that generally admit between a third to half of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally are in the top 20-35 percent of their high school graduating class, with high school grade averages from B+ to B. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 75<sup>th</sup> percentile. Out of the total 83 institutions in this category, 94% are included in this analysis.
3. Very Competitive – Institutions that generally admit between 50-75 percent of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally are in the top 35-50 percent of their graduating class and have high school grade averages of a B- or better. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 67<sup>th</sup> percentile. Out of the total 257 institutions in this category, 93% are included in this analysis.
4. Competitive – Institutions that generally admit between 75-85 percent of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted are generally in the top 50-65 percent of their high school graduating class and have a high school grade average of a B- or better. SAT and ACT scores are in the top 60<sup>th</sup> percentile. Out of the total 703 institutions in this category, 88% are included in this analysis.
5. Less Competitive – Institutions that generally admit more than 85 percent of their applicant pool. Students that are admitted generally rank in the top 65 percent of their graduating class and have high school grade averages below a C. SAT and ACT scores are below the top 60<sup>th</sup> percentile. Out of the total 208 institutions in this category, 87% are included in this analysis.
6. Non-Competitive – Institutions that either admit more than 98 percent of their applicant pool, admit all in-state

residents, but have some requirements for out-of-state students, or require evidence of a high school diploma from an accredited school. Out of the total 54 institutions in this category, 74% are included in this analysis.

7. Special – Institutions that are specialized, such as professional schools of art, music, or other disciplines. Schools oriented towards adult learners are also sometimes in this category. Out of the total 67 institutions in this category, 72% are included in this analysis.
8. Unranked – all institutions not otherwise categorized in the Barron's selectivity index (N=212).

### HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (HBCUs)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are traditionally defined as institutions that were established prior to 1964, that have a principal mission of educating black Americans, and are accredited or making reasonable progress towards accreditation. The Clearinghouse data's coverage rate is 90 percent of HBCUs for fall 2020. The current analysis includes approximately 90 percent of the HBCUs in the NSC universe in fall 2020 (or 83% of their undergraduate enrollment).

### HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIs)

Hispanic-Serving Institutions are traditionally defined as institutions where 25 percent or more of their enrollment are Latinx students. We used the [HSI list](#) for 2018-19 by Excelencia. This results in 539 institutions. The Clearinghouse data's coverage rate is 89 percent of HSIs for fall 2020. The current analysis includes approximately 95 percent of the HSIs in the NSC universe (and 82% of their undergraduate enrollments).

### 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 purposes of this report, we classify "Primarily Associate Degree-Granting Bachelor's Institutions" as two-year institutions for all comparison years regardless of when such a sectoral shift occurred. We also re-coded the "Mixed AA/BA institutions" in the Carnegie classification as two-year institutions, for these institutions confer most awards at the associate degree level.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Bobbitt, R., Causey, J., Kim, H., Lang, R., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (Aug 2021), *COVID-19 Transfer, Mobility, and Progress, Academic Year 2020-2021 Report*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center