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Washington's Community College Baccalaureate Degrees: Growth and Outcomes, 2024 Update

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This report shows that community college baccalaureate (CCB) degrees, primarily in the form of Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) but also Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) and Bachelor of Science (BS), are now offered and growing in community and technical colleges (CTCs) in Washington. In our analysis of quantitative data representing six years, from academic years 2018-19 to 2023-24, and qualitative interviews with 13 CCB students/graduates of rural-serving colleges, we found the following major results:

- There was a relatively small decline in enrollment in CCB programs during COVID-19 compared to the overall CTC enrollment, which saw a much steeper decline. By 2023-24, CCB program enrollments reached the pre-COVID enrollment level of about 6,500 students.
- Business, information technology, healthcare, and education are program areas that garnered the highest CCB enrollments over the six years we studied, with some differences in student enrollment patterns for rural-serving and non-rural-serving institutions. Younger female students with unmet financial need are more prevalent in CCB enrollment at rural-serving than non-rural-serving institutions.
- Overall, the majority of enrolled CCB students are female, and nearly half of all students are 30 years of age or older. The proportion of students identifying as Black/African American or two or more races are increasing, while white students are declining among CCB students. Black/African American students are slightly overrepresented, and Latine students are slightly underrepresented among CCB students relative to their percentage in Washington's overall population.
- Completion rates of CCB programs rival transfer completion rates in the state, with 70% of CCB students completing their bachelor's degrees within four years, compared to 72% of four-year university students.
- Graduates of CCB programs working full-time earned a median annual wage of nearly \$65,000 one year after graduation, with earnings growing by nearly \$30,000 five years after graduation.
- We found lower earnings for CCB female graduates, some racially minoritized groups, particularly Black/African American graduates, and graduates of rural-serving institutions.
- The rural students/graduates who we interviewed attributed their success in CCB programs to the online and hybrid learning formats, structured cohorts, financial aid and scholarships, leadership development opportunities, and other intentional features of their CCB programs.
- Most of the rural CCB students we interviewed overcame personal and academic challenges to complete their BAS degrees, demonstrating resilience and commitment to staying in their rural regions to live and work after completing their degrees.
- The rural CCB students/graduates spoke with pride about their career advancements, greater sense of economic security for themselves and their families, and engagement in community and public service, which they found personally satisfying.
- Working adult learners in rural areas are noteworthy beneficiaries of CCB education, attributing their success to the support they received from college faculty, staff, fellow cohort members, family and friends, and ongoing social connections they formed during their CCB programs.
- Taken together, these quantitative and qualitative results underscore the value of CCB programs in rural regions of Washington where students are place bound and with limited access to other higher education options.

Introduction

Despite recent debates about the merits of higher education, data continues to support its enduring value as an investment (Georgetown University, 2022). According to projections from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevale, et al., 2023), the demand for workers with bachelor's degrees is expected to grow from 36% of U.S. jobs in 2021 to approximately 42% by 2031. This trend is particularly pronounced in Washington, which ranks among the top 15 states for jobs requiring advanced education, placing 15th for bachelor's degree requirements and 14th for graduate degree requirements (Carnevale, et al., 2023). However, significant disparities exist in degree attainment across demographic groups in Washington (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Whereas 41% of white residents have earned at least a bachelor's degree, these rates drop to 28% for Black residents and 20% for Latine residents.

To meet the need for bachelor's degree graduates and address the completion gap, the landscape of higher education is evolving. Twenty-four states now permit community colleges to award bachelor's degrees in applied fields, and more are considering similar policies (Community College Baccalaureate Association [CCBA] & Bragg, 2024). Washington pioneered this approach in the early 2000s, implementing policy reforms to increase bachelor's degree accessibility. Applied baccalaureates offered by community colleges provide opportunities for diverse groups, including professional and technical associate degree holders, people of color, adult students, and those with local family commitments. Recognizing the value of bachelor's degrees for students and rural communities, the SBCTC and individual colleges have recently focused on implementing new degree opportunities in areas of high workforce demand, such as a bachelor's of applied science in teacher education at Grays Harbor College.

This analysis examines data from the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to evaluate the educational outcomes and career impacts for students in community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs. The focus of the report is on CCB programs offered in Washington over the six years period of 2018-2024 and highlights results pertaining to CCB programs, students, and graduates of rural-serving colleges.

Research Questions

To better understand the outcomes of CCB degrees and the contribution that graduates make to their local communities and the economy, we employed a mixed methods approach. We analyzed quantitative data gathered on CCB degrees across Washington, and we delved more deeply into CCB degree programs offered by rural-serving community colleges. The three research topics include enrollment, earnings, and experience, guided by the following research questions:

1. Who enrolls in CCB programs in Washington, including rural community and technical college (CTC) districts, and how have student populations enrolling in CCB programs evolved over the six-year period of 2018-19 to 2023-24?
2. What are the median annual earnings of CCB graduates? How do earnings vary by race, gender, program area, and rurality?
3. What are the lived experiences of rural CCB students? How has a CCB degree impacted their personal and professional lives and livelihoods and the community around them?

Methods and Research

This research project was developed and carried out through a partnership among SBCTC, the University of Washington, and the consulting firm Bragg & Associates. Employing a concurrent mixed methods approach, we obtained and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions. The University of Washington provided Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for both the quantitative and qualitative methods after reviewing the research plan and interview protocol.

Quantitative Methods

The quantitative student-level data was obtained through a partnership with the University of Washington with the SBCTC on 20,217 students who matriculated into an applied baccalaureate program with the intent to get a bachelor's degree between summer 2016 and spring 2024. As of spring 2024, 5,052 of these students were still enrolled, and 9,533 students graduated with a bachelor's degree. The other 5,632 students (27%) did not graduate with a bachelor's degree and are not enrolled as of spring 2024. The last SBCTC applied baccalaureate outcomes report reported data through 2017. Therefore, we began our data analysis in 2018.

The employment and earnings data presented later in this report are based on 103,871 individual quarterly wage records of graduates where student data from SBCTC was linked to employment security department unemployment insurance data. This data is from the quarter of graduation to up to 19 quarters (five years) after completion. To calculate wages (i.e., earnings), we used quarterly earnings from the fourth, eighth, twelfth, sixteenth, and nineteenth (the longest timepoint available for analysis) quarters after completion, adjusted for inflation.

Qualitative Methods

The qualitative component of this study planned for in-person and/or Zoom interviews with students and graduates at multiple CTCs that serve rural regions of Washington. Three rural community colleges were chosen to participate in the study, with Centralia College, Peninsula College, and Skagit Valley College facilitating access to CCB students and graduates in fall 2024. Campus leaders at each college played a key role in identifying CCB students and graduates for 1-hour on-campus or Zoom interviews. Contact information was communicated to our research team, and we followed up to invite CCB students and graduates to participate in the study.

We prioritized interviewing CCB students and graduates of color in rural regions who were the first in their family to attend college, whose personal and family background demonstrated financial need to attend college, including eligibility to qualify for federal financial aid, whose age was outside traditional college age at the time they participated in the CCB program, and who would find it challenging to travel for a degree.

In total, we interviewed 13 students and graduates using an interview protocol developed by the research team, reviewed by the SBCTC team, and approved by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interviewees were selected from a total of 18 nominees nominated by the three colleges, with five failing to respond to our email or text invitations or actively declining to participate. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using the online service Scribie. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews, and these notes were triangulated with the transcripts and interview summaries generated from audio files. We used inductive coding to identify major themes and patterns in the interview data, including identifying verbatim quotes that help enhance understanding of the results.

Quantitative Results

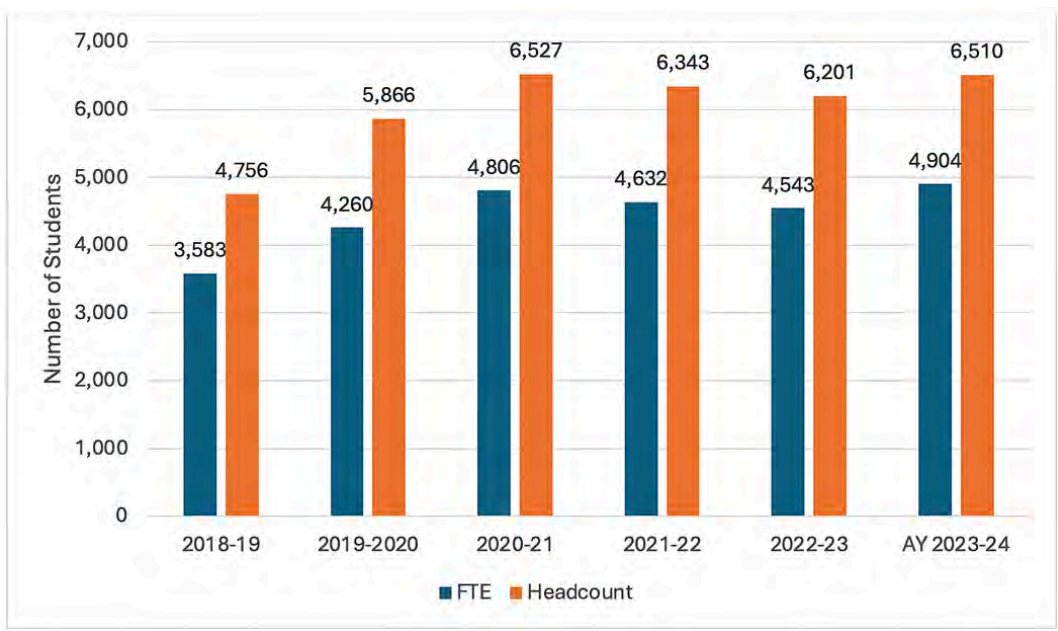
CCB Enrollment

In 2024, all 34 Washington CTCs were authorized to offer at least one BAS degree. Total enrollment in CCB programs in Washington has rebounded after the effects of COVID-19, with academic year 2020-21 and 2023-24 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) enrollment, a calculation that represents how many students would be enrolled if all were enrolled full-time, at 4,806 and 4,904, respectively. In 2023-24, **Washington logged the highest annual FTE enrollment in CCB degree programs since the state passed legislation authorizing these degrees in 2005.** Headcount enrollment, the number of unique students enrolled in 2023-24, is slightly lower than 2020-21, which coincides with the first year of the 2020 pandemic. Overall, these six-year trend data appear to be on a trajectory to continue to grow into the future.

To put these numbers into perspective, Figure 2 shows total FTE and headcount student enrollment for all CTCs in the state, and some interesting findings emerge.

First, the percentage decline in CCB student FTE and headcount enrollment since the onset of the 2020 pandemic is much less than the decline in total CTC student FTE and headcount enrollment (Figure 1 and Figure 2). CCB headcount enrollment increased from 2019-20 to 2020-21 (11%) and then declined slightly from 2020-21 to 2022-23 (5%). By 2023-24, CCB headcount enrollment recovered to 6,510, which is nearly identical to the peak enrollment of 6,527 in 2020-21. By comparison, the decline in total CTC student FTE and headcount was much greater at the onset of the pandemic, dropping by 22% from 2019-20 to 2020-21 (Figure 2). This steep decline continued in 2021-22 before reversing and showing steady growth to 572,110 in 2023-24. In contrast to CCB student headcount enrollment, which had recovered by 2023-24, the total CTC student headcount enrollment still lags by 24% in 2023-24 compared to 2018-19.

Figure 1: CCB enrollment by year, FTE, and headcount



A second important finding emerging from our comparison of CCB students and total CTC student enrollment is the relationship between the FTE and headcount counts. Comparing these two measures of enrollment for the two student groups shows FTE and headcount enrollment is much more similar for the CCB student group than all CTC students. Specifically, the count for CCB student FTE enrollment of 4,904 equates to 76% of the headcount enrollment of 6,510. By comparison, the CTC student FTE enrollment of 273,437 equates to only 48% of student headcount enrollment. These findings suggest a much higher proportion of CCB students enroll full-time than the total CTC student population. This finding is important because rigorous research, like the 10-year randomized-controlled trial follow-up study of CUNY's Accelerated Studies in Associates Programs (Weiss et al., 2024), shows FTE enrollment correlates with retention and degree completion.

To elucidate student enrollment in CCB programs, we examined the programs of study in which these students enrolled over the six-year period from 2018-19 to 2023-24. According to a spring 2024 Washington SBCTC report, 165 CCB degree programs were approved at all CTCs in the state at that time, nearly doubling the 87 approved programs offered by 27 CTCs in 2016-17. These programs confer BAS, BSN, and BS degrees. Tables 1-5 show student enrollment by the number or percentage of students entering a bachelor's degree program at a college each academic year from 2018-19 to 2023-24. If a student had previously been enrolled, they are re-counted in the entering cohort only if it has been seven or more years since their last matriculation into a BAS program at the same college.

Figure 3 reveals the largest CCB program areas by entering cohorts are business administration, management and marketing, followed by information technology, and health services and technology.

Figure 2: Total CTC enrollment by year, FTE, and headcount

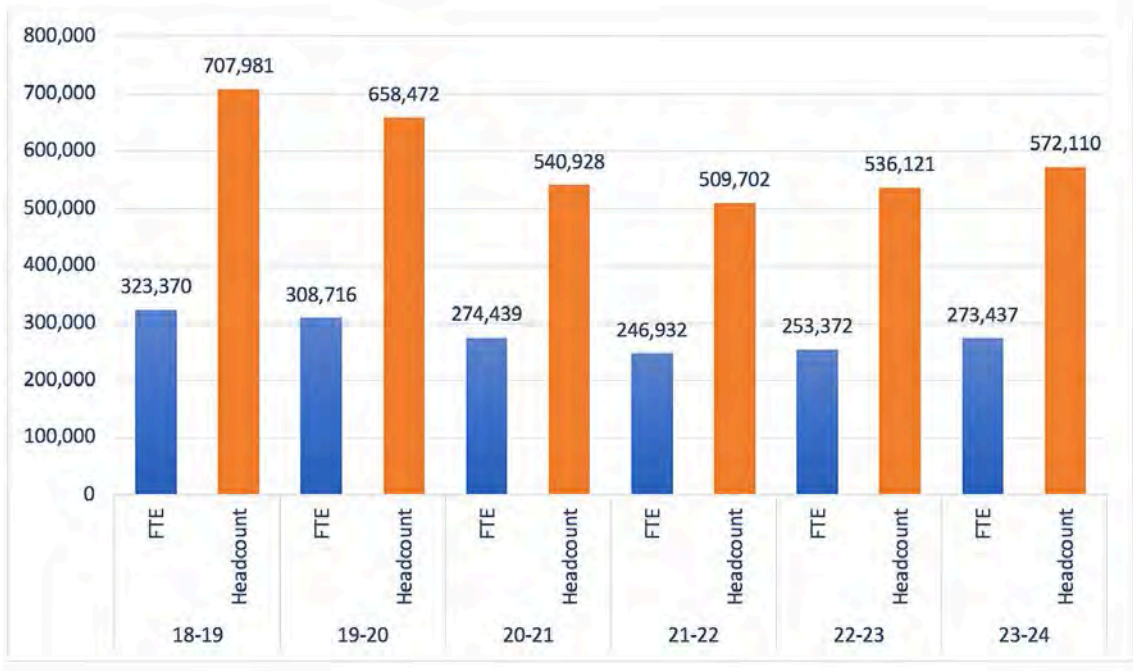
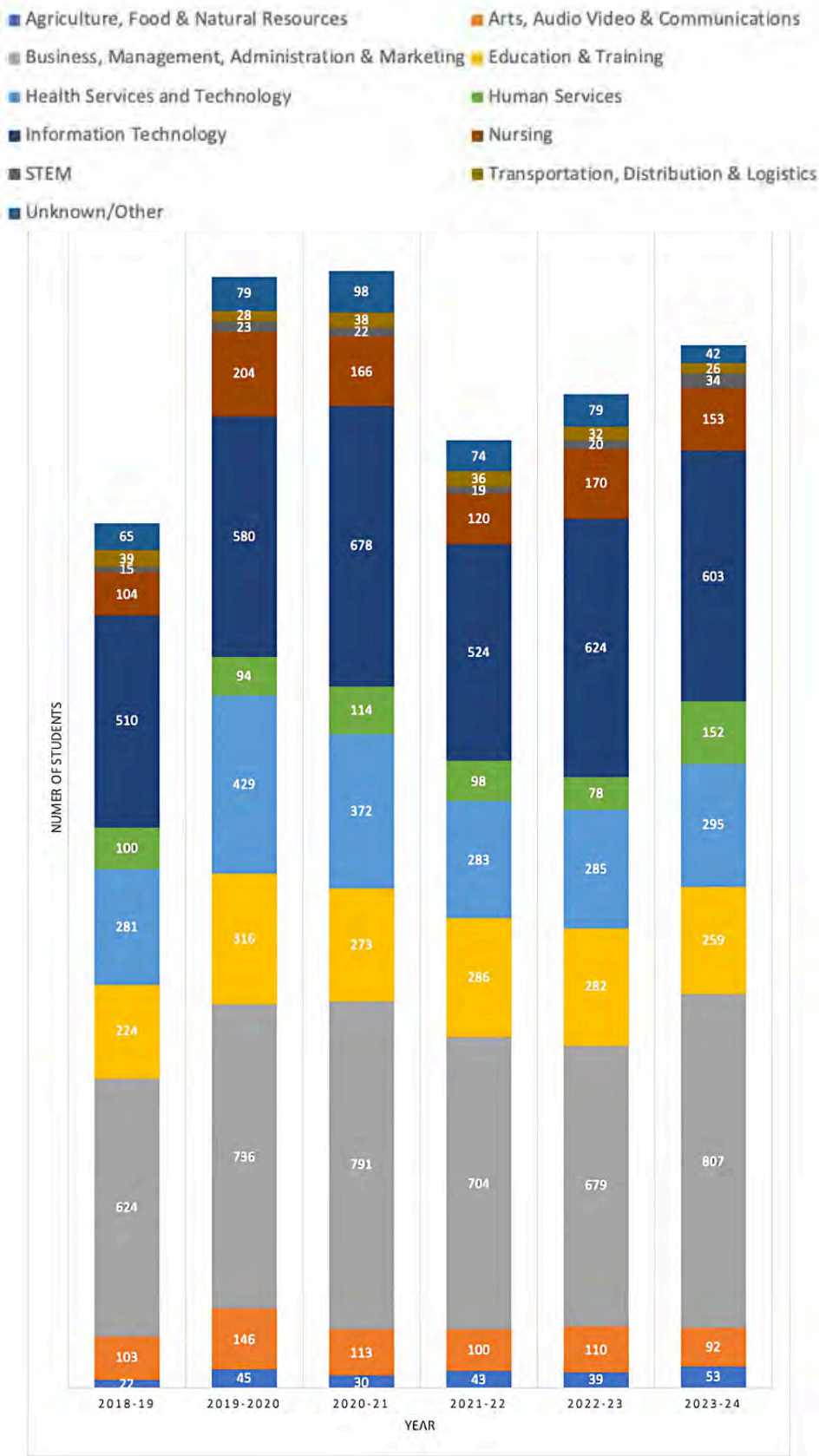


Figure 3: CCB entering cohort by program classification



CCB programs continue to serve a racially and ethnically diverse group of students in the most recent year in this study, with 8% of students identifying as Black/African American, 8% as Latine, and a growing percentage (17%) as two or more races. Latine students are underrepresented in CCB degree programs relative to their proportion of the population of the state (14.4%) (Washington State Office of Financial Management [OFM], 2025b), whereas Black students and students of two or more races are overrepresented (OFM, 2025a), at 4% and 10%, respectively. Students have become slightly more racially and ethnically diverse from 2018-2024, with a slight increase in the percentage of Black/African American students from 6% in 2018-19 to 8% in 2023-24. The percentage of students reporting two or more races has also increased from 12% in 2018-19 to 17% in 2023-24, whereas the percentage of white students has dropped from 53% in 2018-19 to 48% in 2023-24.

Since their inception, CCB programs have attracted a majority female student body. In 2023-24, 58% of students in CCB programs identified as female, a percentage that has remained relatively steady from 2017-18 to 2023-24. Since their inception, CCB programs have attracted a majority female student body. In 2023-24, 58% of students in CCB programs identified as female, a percentage that has remained relatively steady from 2017-18 to 2023-24.

Students in CCB programs are older than students in the overall community college population of the state. In 2024, the most recent year of data, nearly half (48%) of CCB students were over the age of 30. Over from 2018-2024, the age of CCB participants has remained steady, with 46% to 49% of CCB students being 30-39 and 40 or above.

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity of students enrolled by entering cohort

Race/Ethnicity	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Am. Indian/AK Native	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Asian	13%	12%	13%	14%	14%	14%
Black/African American	6%	6%	7%	8%	8%	8%
Hispanic/Latine	8%	9%	9%	8%	9%	8%
Pacific Islander	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%
White	53%	51%	48%	48%	48%	48%
2+ Races	12%	13%	14%	15%	16%	17%
Not Reported	7%	7%	7%	5%	4%	4%

Table 2: Gender of enrolled students by entering cohort

Gender	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Female	56%	58%	59%	59%	57%	58%
Male	44%	42%	41%	40%	41%	40%
Not Reported	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%

Students in CCB programs are a different population of students than students enrolled in transfer programs in Washington CTCs.

It is important to note that students in CCB programs are a different population of students than students enrolled in transfer programs in Washington CTCs. Data from the 2024 SBCTC enrollment data dashboard shows that, from 2018 to 2024, 55% of CCB students received need-based aid, compared to 34% of CTC students designated as transfer students. Moreover, 10% of CCB students reported a disability compared to 6% of transfer students, and 8% were veterans compared to 3% of transfer students. CCB students are also significantly older than CTC transfer students, with nearly 50% of students over age 30. In contrast, only 15% of CTC transfer students were over 30.

Turning to rural-serving institutions, we used The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges rural-serving college metric (Koricich, et al., 2022) to determine which CTCs to consider rural-serving in Washington.

55% of CCB students received need-based aid, compared to 34% of CTC students designated as transfer students.

Table 3: Age of enrolled students by entering cohort

Age	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Under 20	3%	5%	4%	3%	3%	3%
20-24	26%	27%	28%	27%	27%	27%
25-29	23%	22%	21%	22%	21%	21%
30-39	27%	26%	28%	28%	29%	28%
40 or above	21%	20%	19%	20%	20%	20%

Table 4: Comparing CCB students at rural-serving and non-rural-serving institutions, 2023-2024

CCB Characteristics	Rural-Serving Institutions (n=10)	Non-Rural-Serving Institutions (n=24)
Total headcount (2023-24)	998	5,512
Female	68%	57%
Under age 25	40%	35%
Received need-based aid	51%	46%

The 10 colleges emerging from our analysis were Bellingham, Big Bend, Centralia, Grays Harbor, Lower Columbia, Peninsula, Skagit Valley, Wenatchee, Whatcom, and Yakima. Altogether, these colleges enrolled 998 CCB students in 2023-2024, accounting for 15% of the total headcount of 6,510 students. To put these numbers into perspective, the SBCTC dashboard for FTE and headcount enrollment shows these 10 colleges account for 17% of CTC headcount enrollment in Washington's CTCs in 2023-24. Therefore, the percentage headcount enrollment of CCB students at rural-serving institutions is slightly lower than non-rural-serving institutions, at 2% less.

Students enrolled in CCB programs at rural-serving institutions exhibit different demographic characteristics than students enrolled at non-rural-serving institutions. Specifically, a higher percentage of CCB students enrolled in rural-serving institutions are female, under age 25, and recipients of need-based aid than students enrolled in non-rural-serving institutions (Table 4).

To delve deeper into understanding student attendance at rural-serving and non-rural-serving institutions, we used the list of spring 2024 CCB programs published on the SBCTC website to find the 165 programs offered by 33 Washington institutions, with the two colleges in the Pierce District combined into one. Results generated by this analysis show that a higher percentage of rural-serving institutions offer business, health, STEM, and education programs than non-rural-serving institutions. More research is needed to determine whether the focus of these programs at rural institutions or other factors explain why a higher proportion of younger female students are enrolling in rural-serving than non-rural-serving institutions. More research is needed to understand this attendance pattern, but **these data suggest the combination of CCB programs offered in rural settings may be especially attractive to young women who seek a bachelor's close to home.**

Table 5: Percent rural- and non-rural-serving institutions offering bachelor's degree programs, 2023-24

Bachelor's degree programs (165 programs)	Number bachelor's programs in WA	Percent of all institutions offering the degree program (n=33)	Percent rural- serving institutions offering the degree program (n=10)	Percent non- rural-serving institutions offering the degree program (n=23)
Information Technology (IT)	46	70%	60%	74%
Health, wellness, & safety	44	70%	80%	65%
Business management	35	73%	90%	65%
Education	16	45%	60%	39%
Science, technology, engineering, & mathematics (STEM) fields	15	39%	60%	30%
Trades, construction, & manufacturing	5	15%	10%	17%
Other	4	12%	0%	12%

Completion and Labor Market Outcomes

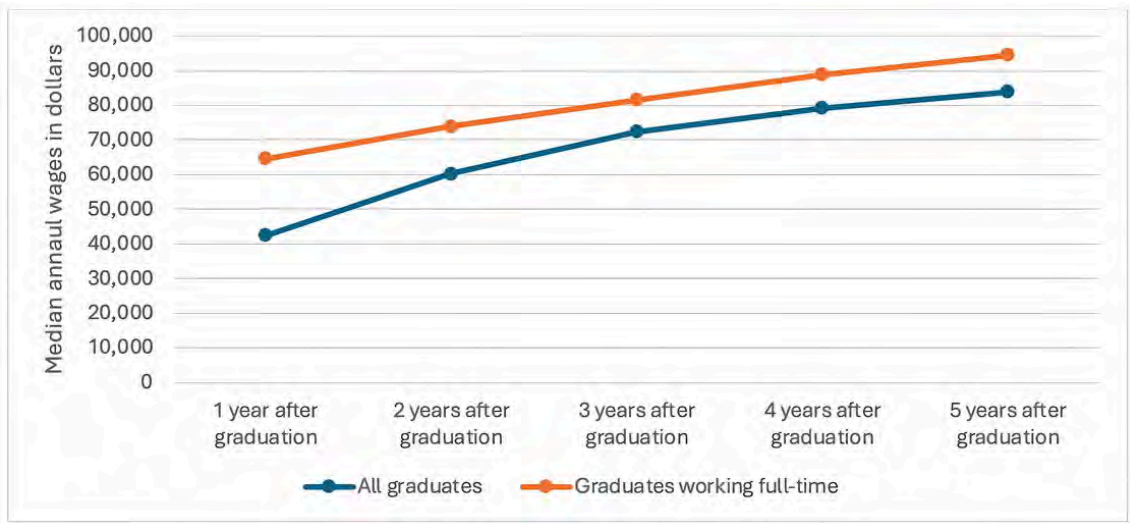
Students who completed a CCB degree took an average of 7.8 quarters to earn their degree after matriculation into a CCB program, which equates to about two years if a student enrolls all four quarters for two years. Of the students who enrolled in a Washington CCB in 2018, 70% had completed their program within four years. To put this outcome into perspective, we compared these results to students who transferred from a community college to a four-year public university, where we found 72% of students completed a bachelor's degree within four years of transfer (Meza, 2024).

Graduates working full-time earned a median annual wage of \$64,566 one year (four quarters) after graduating from a CCB program, with a lower median annual wage for all CCB graduates of \$42,467 one year after graduation (Figure 4 and Table 5).

Five years after graduation, the wage of full-time working CCB graduates rose by nearly \$30,000, to a median of \$94,523, and the wage gap of this group compared to all CCB graduates cut in half to \$10,650, with the overall group of CCB graduates making a median wage of \$83,523. This shift may be associated, in part, to a rising proportion of full-time working CCB graduates, from 51% at one year post-graduation to 72% at five years post-graduation. This finding calls into question an assumption that many CCB students are already working full-time in their field of study (see, for example, Floyd & Skolnik, 2019). However, given the years this dataset covers, we may also be seeing some effects of COVID-19, when fewer people were working full-time in 2020 and 2021.

When we include graduates who may be working part-time, we see wages are lower, but whether they are working full or part time, all graduates achieve a median wage of \$83,873 five years after graduation.

Figure 4: Median annual earnings from 1 to 5 years after graduation for all CCB graduates compared to CCB graduates working full-time



Median wages varied by program area, with CCB students who graduated from health professions (including nursing) and computer and information science programs achieving the highest wages of all programs of study after five years and students in communications technology programs earning the lowest (Figure 5 and Table 6). Table 6 reports median earnings using the U.S. Department of Education Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) schema.

Digging more deeply into student demographics, we examined wages by race/ethnicity, gender, and rurality of students three years after graduation (Table 7). Three years were chosen because this appeared to be when most workers had settled into full-time work and achieved a salary commensurate with their degree. This analysis produced concerning results for Black/African American graduates. This group had the lowest median annual earnings of all racial/ethnic groups three years after graduation, lagging nearly \$8,900 behind the Hawaiian or Pacific Islander group that had the highest median annual earnings at almost \$77,000.

Table 5: Median annual earnings from 1 to 5 years after graduation for all CCB graduates and percentage of all CCB graduates working full-time

	1 year after graduation	2 years after graduation	3 years after graduation	4 years after graduation	5 years after graduation
Median wages for all graduates	\$42,467	\$60,269	\$72,455	\$79,256	\$83,873
Median wages for graduates working full-time	\$64,566	\$73,894	\$81,654	\$88,898	\$94,523
% of graduates working full-time	51.4%	62.8%	71.4%	72.7%	71.6%

Figure 5: Median annual earnings 1 to 5 years after graduation by program of study for all CCB graduates

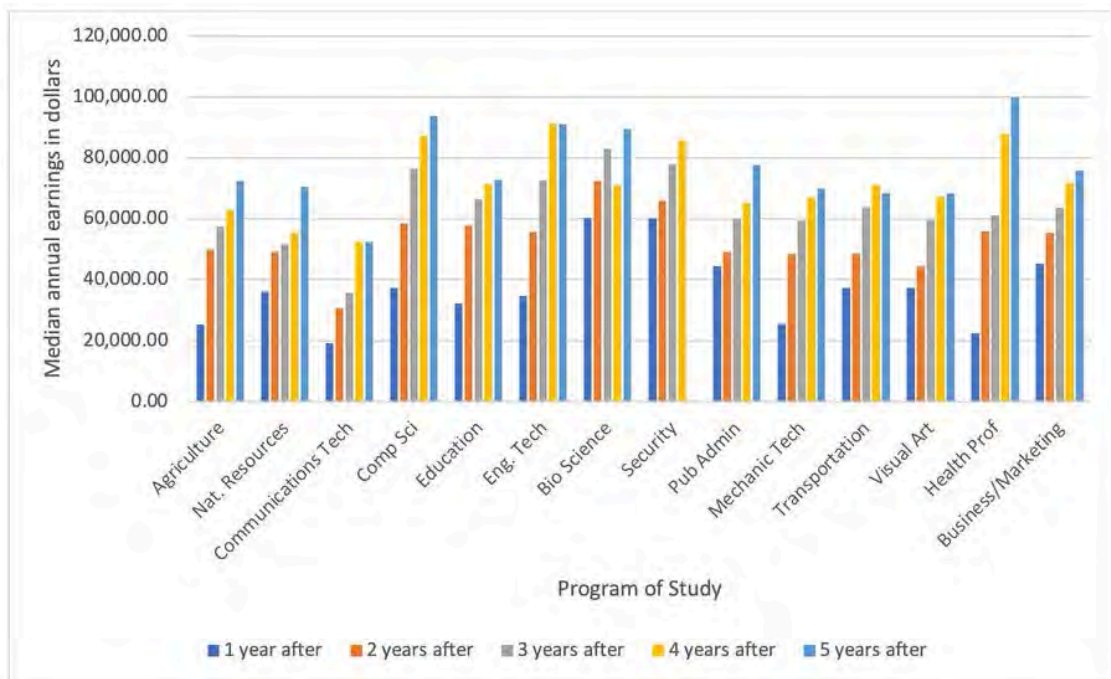


Table 6: Median annual earnings 1 to 5 years after graduation by program of study for all CCB graduates

Program of Study (CIP Code)	Years after graduation				
	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years
Agriculture (01)	\$25,291.02	\$49,999.56	\$57,561.91	\$62,995.05	\$72,417.38
Nat. Resources (03)	\$36,064.30	\$49,097.71	\$51,634.40	\$55,540.39	\$70,640.60
Comm. Tech (10)	\$19,160.38	\$30,518.58	\$35,677.61	\$52,500.77	\$52,500.77
Comp & Info Sci (11)	\$37,297.77	\$58,535.96	\$76,411.47	\$87,312.02	\$93,709.41
Education (13)	\$32,192.57	\$58,012.22	\$66,538.82	\$71,553.46	\$72,808.96
Engineering Tech (15)	\$34,639.93	\$55,731.28	\$72,583.80	\$91,306.11	\$91,164.16
Bio Science (26)	\$60,337.21	\$72,432.07	\$82,906.77	\$70,963.65	\$89,387.38
Security (43)	\$60,254.00	\$66,137.46	\$77,963.10	\$85,515.65	N/A
Pub Admin (44)	\$44,463.64	\$49,149.11	\$59,915.04	\$65,322.49	\$77,615.58
Mechanic & Repair Tech (47)	\$25,447.65	\$48,517.69	\$59,309.32	\$67,023.40	\$70,014.07
Transportation & Materials Moving (49)	\$37,405.45	\$48,517.69	\$63,734.15	\$71,081.12	\$68,467.34
Visual Art (50)	\$37,405.45	\$44,479.54	\$59,568.74	\$67,351.35	\$68,344.98
Health Prof (51)	\$22,383.55	\$55,887.91	\$61,232.95	\$87,953.22	\$99,852.29
Business/Marketing (52)	\$45,222.32	\$55,459.62	\$63,631.36	\$71,854.49	\$75,770.27

Table 7: Median annual earnings 3 years after graduation by race/ethnicity

	2+Races	Am Ind or Alaska Native	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latine	Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	White	Not reported
Earnings 3 years after graduation	\$73,191	\$74,023	\$74,938	\$67,914	\$72,026	\$76,695	\$72,442	\$70,151

Table 8: Median earnings 3 years after graduation by gender

	Female	Male	Unknown/Not reported
Earnings 3 years after graduation	\$69,141	\$76,084	\$71,404

Reflecting previous research (Meza & Bragg, 2022), female graduates earned less than male graduates. The median annual earnings of male graduates was nearly \$7,000 more than female graduates, meaning male graduates made about 9% more in median annual earnings than their female counterparts.

Currently, we do not have a way to measure annual earnings that provides as much information as we'd like on the contributions CCB degrees make to the economic security of graduates in rural areas. The measure that we have indicates where the employer is based but may undercount employees in rural areas if their employer also has a headquarters in a larger city.

Understanding this limitation, our analysis shows CCB graduates working for employers based in small cities or small towns do have lower median annual earnings than CCB graduates working for employers based in metropolitan areas (Table 9). These graduates are likely to live in rural areas where a lower wage might be sufficient for the local cost of living, but further research and additional measures are needed.

Table 9: Median annual earnings 3 years after graduation by rurality of employer

	Metropolitan area	Small city of less than 50,000 residents	Small town of less than 10,000 residents or rural area
Earnings 3 years after graduation	\$73,571	\$59,579	\$64,870

Qualitative Results

Characteristics of participants

Turning to the qualitative portion of this study, Table 10 summarizes the characteristics of 13 CCB students and graduates who were interviewed about their CCB experiences. The table reports each participant by college, CCB degree program, pronouns, race, first-generation college status, whether the participant was an adult learner (i.e., over 25 when enrolled in the program), and whether each was a parent while enrolled in the program. In addition to these characteristics, two participants reported being veterans whose funding from military service helped finance their CCB degree. One working learner received financial support from her employer to help pay for her CCB program enrollment.

The individual, hour-long interviews with 13 CCB students and graduates (students/graduates) from Centralia College (CC), Peninsula College (PC), and Skagit Valley College (SVC) produced about 250 single-spaced pages of qualitative data. This section is divided into three parts: 1) student/graduate characteristics and backgrounds, 2) the lived experiences of students/graduates while enrolled in the CCB program, and 3) the benefits students/graduates associate with the CCB program. Collectively, these findings illuminate the role rural-serving community colleges play in fostering the economic mobility, professional growth, and community engagement of CCB students/graduates.

Table 10: Characteristics of Interviewed CCB Students and Graduates

College & Student Sample	CCB Degree Program	Student / Graduate Status	Pronouns	Race	Financial Aid Recipient	First-Gen College	Adult Learner	Parent
Centralia College (CC)								
Student CC1	BAS-AM	Student	She/her	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student CC2	BAS-TE	Graduate	She/her	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student CC3	BAS-BH	Graduate	She/her	Latine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student CC4	BAS-AM	Graduate	She/her	White	Yes	No	No	Yes
Peninsula College (PC)								
Student PC1	BAS-AM	Graduate	She/her	White	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Student PC2	BAS-BH	Student	He/him	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student PC3	BAS-AM	Graduate	He/him	White	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Student PC4	BAS-AM	Graduate	He/him	White	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Skagit Valley College (SV)								
Student SV1	BAS-AM	Graduate	She/her	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student SV2	BAS-AM	Graduate	He/his	Latine	Yes	Yes	No	No
Student SV3	BAS-AM	Graduate	She/her	Latine	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Student SV4	BAS-AM	Graduate	She/her	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Student SV5	BAS-AM	Graduate	He/his	Latine	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Student/graduate characteristics and backgrounds

The 13 CCB students/graduates represent a diverse group of individuals who pursued higher education amid a variety of life circumstances. As shown in Table 10, all but two of the interviewees are CCB graduates (these two are still enrolled), with varied gender, race, unmet financial need, first-generation college, work, and parental status. Our interviews also revealed these students/graduates experienced a wide range of life challenges before and during their participation in a CCB program, including homelessness, food insecurity, and economic insecurity due to unemployment and underemployment. Many students/graduates also mentioned responsibilities caring for children, parents, and extended family, contributing to the importance they attributed to balancing multiple roles. College instructors and staff who recognized this need and supported learning from a holistic perspective were greatly appreciated by the students.

To this point, 12 of the 13 students/graduates experienced financial pressures when attending college, with most using federal Pell grants along with state and local (e.g., college foundation) scholarships to help pay for their studies. Also, employer tuition reimbursement was a source of financial support for a Latine female graduate who praised her employer for providing resources to help her participate her CCB degree. Despite her relatively modest income, this graduate's overall family income disqualified her from Pell, creating the very real possibility that she would have to take out loans to complete her bachelor's degree. Refusing this option, this CCB graduate explained, "I didn't want to take any loans. When you think about the word 'loans,' you get anxiety and stuff like that, so I was like, no, I'm not gonna do that." Her employer paid up to \$5,000 per year for successful completion of coursework toward the bachelor's degree. This graduate completed her BAS degree in applied management and now leads a private non-profit center offering early childhood education for migrants, seasonal farmworkers, and rural residents experiencing economic insecurity in the region.

What are the lived experiences of students in CCB programs in rural-serving community colleges?

Students/graduates from all three colleges emphasized the importance of their CCB programs being accessible and flexible in terms of their learning formats and student supports, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the extreme health concerns regarding COVID-19 have passed, most CCB programs shifted to a fully online format before the students graduated with their bachelor's degrees. For some of these students, this transition was welcome, but some felt the switch added stress to their learning, anticipating academic and social challenges that did and did not materialize. To this point, at least one college created virtual study groups to supplement formal instruction, including helping students to register for classes using the new CTC Link system and continuing to support them through various online formats through graduation.

Further, the students/graduates expressed varied perspectives toward the online and hybrid (in-person and online) learning models used by their CCB programs. On the positive side, some said they appreciated online and hybrid formats because they enabled better education/work-life balance. Speaking about the hybrid format specifically, some students/graduates appreciated being able to take one in-person course, along with online courses, saying they tended to perform better in in-person classes. They felt their education was enhanced by the social dimensions of classroom learning and face-to-face networking that happens through physical presence on campus. Illustrating this perspective, one student/graduate observed, "***I don't know that I would have gotten through it [the BAS program] this easily if it would have been completely online. Having the support of my cohort and my peers, really, it just... There's something for that, I don't know what it is. It's just the community.***" Added to this perspective, some students/graduates attributed the online and hybrid formats to their ability to maintain full-time employment and family care-giving.

Also, most students/graduates mentioned that they valued the cohort (learning community) model used by their CCB program, indicating staying together as a group for the entire program fostered a sense of community and peer support. Some students/graduates described their cohort experience as creating a "family-like" learning environment that provided emotional and academic support. A few students/graduates said the relationships they built within the cohort increased their motivation to learn and complete the program, with one student saying her involvement in group projects and peer feedback elevated her confidence and communication skills, which she continues to use in her professional role in the workplace. A few students said they continue to connect with cohort members through social media, recognizing the social capital they built individually and collectively with classmates during their CCB studies.

When asked how the program may have influenced the students/graduates in other ways, some students/graduates reported they experienced personal growth as a leader, including strengthening their sense of self-efficacy and their critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities. About half of the students/graduates cited examples of how their CCB program had contributed to their own leadership development. Seven of the 13 students talked about how leadership development had been a significant benefit of their bachelor's education. Speaking about leadership and equity, one graduate said her understanding of "equity, power, and bias" had grown through her CCB program, favorably influencing her approach now as an instructor in the same program that conferred her bachelor's degree. Another participant spoke about how the CCB program advocated for students to serve their communities, which is exemplified by one student/graduate reporting his bachelor's degree encouraged him to work with others in the community to address resource needs. Soft skills, such as public speaking, communications, and networking, were seen as key to CCB graduate success.

Importantly, most students/graduates said the local community college's offering of a CCB program made their bachelor's degree possible. **Most participants doubted they would have ever gotten a baccalaureate without the local community college option**, given the challenges of greater distance and higher costs associated with attending four-year universities in the state. Numerous students/graduates also said their familiarity with and respect for the local community college contributed to their choosing a CCB program. Reflecting this perspective, one student/graduate said they decided to get a bachelor's from their local community college because *"this [college] is my home. This is where I've always been, and so I've known this [college] is a pillar of the community for such a long time. Thinking about going outside of my community to further my education just didn't sit right with me..."*

Another student/graduate decided to pursue a BAS degree from the local community college because of the program's accessibility. She explained, "I live 20 minutes away from here, just 20 minutes south of here. Being able to still participate in my community, because that's really important to me, especially now, being heavily involved in the community, and still being able to function in life..." This graduate is now employed by the same community college that awarded her BAS degree, where she now brings her life experience with homelessness to support college enrollment for homeless youth.

Another student/graduate works as a police sheriff for a remote region in the state that demands his full-time presence. He said he would not have been able to afford a bachelor's degree from a university. He also shared that being able to get a CCB degree "means a tremendous amount to my family... I don't have the investments to afford it [university bachelor's]". He foresaw future benefits of his CCB degree, saying, *"I can get another job in the state system doing something with that bachelor's degree because you're now in a different level of competitiveness with who's looking for the same jobs and what kind of jobs you're looking for."* Immediate- and long-term economic security was important for this middle-aged father of five.

What benefits do students/graduates of rural-serving community colleges identify from participating and completing CCB programs?

When asked about the benefits students/graduates experienced from participating in a CCB program, most mentioned learning that contributed to their career advancement. **Of all 13 participants, 10 mentioned receiving job promotions or making transitions into work roles that include supervising more personnel and engaging in organizational leadership responsibilities.** Most students/graduates said they received relatively modest wage increases, with a few mentioning a lag in finding employment and securing higher earnings after getting their CCB degree. To this point, one student/graduate said, "I didn't think it would be that difficult because I've never really had issues getting a job, but I did have an interesting time [finding a job] this last summer [after completing a CCB]." In contrast, one student/graduate said her salary doubled from \$30,000 to \$60,000 within two years after securing an administrative position at the community college that conferred her CCB degree. Other career promotions included one CCB student/graduate who moved from being a paraeducator to lead teacher and another who advanced from being a firefighter to an employee of a regional office of emergency management. Other CCB graduates reported career advancements in the agriculture, banking, and healthcare sectors.

Whereas salary increases were important to CCB students/graduates, securing more stable jobs was also valued. Eight of 13 students/graduates cited employment security as a benefit of earning their CCB degree. A few students/graduates noted that having a CCB degree qualified them for roles that would otherwise have been inaccessible to them, including roles in terms of employment and public service on local boards. A student/graduate said they expected lower salaries would be part of staying in their rural area, but they preferred to continue living and working near their current home. Speaking to this point, one student/graduate said, "You don't make money going into emergency management ever, [but] it's okay. I can make more money going somewhere else, but I love the community, and I love the people here. I'm okay with not making millions of dollars, or whatever."

This graduate's commitment to her public service role in the community, despite her lower salary, was satisfying to her.

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Participants who had completed their CCB degree at the time of our study who remained in their local community to live and work.

Nine of the 10 participants who had completed their CCB degree at the time of our study remained in their local community to live and work. Sometimes this community engagement included working at the community college where the students/graduates participated in their CCB program. For example, one CCB graduate thought as many as 17 former CCB graduates had gone on to work at her college, noting the impact the CCB program had on not only graduates but other students attending the college. Other graduates gave examples of how their decisions to take local jobs in agriculture, banking, business, community health, education, social services, and other sectors was critical to the regional economy. As an example, one student/graduate spoke about how her advocacy for a local scholarship program helped address homelessness among high school students, and another student/graduate volunteered time at a local art gallery dedicated to improving mental health.

These students/graduates recognized that getting a bachelor's degree in a rural community is relatively rare, and they expressed gratitude for this opportunity. A few mentioned that finishing a CCB degree heightened their awareness of the value they bring to their community, encouraging them to "give back." Illustrative of this perspective is a CCB graduate who works as a special education director for a local school district and attributes her teaching success to her BAS degree in education. She observed, "[I]f that [BAS] wasn't an option, I probably would not have pursued a teaching certificate... I would have pursued something different, which would've been unfortunate because this is what I'm really good at and I love it, and I've flourished and grown in amazing ways. Had I not had that opportunity, I wouldn't have discovered these things about myself." This graduate went on to recognize wider benefits of the BAS degree for the region, saying, ***"I think it's really important to embrace the people within the community and give them opportunities. I think that's a huge factor."***

Completing a bachelor's degree was a source of pride for CCB students/graduates and their families. Illustrating this point, one graduate said her educational success had inspired her husband to pursue higher education, and another said her experience with the CCB program inspired her sister to return to college. While she had not finished her degree yet, the two sisters nudge and support each other toward achieving their goals. The ripple effects of these kinds of outcomes are difficult to measure quantitatively but important to document qualitatively to illustrate how CCB programs can foster lifelong learning in rural regions of states with minimal higher education options.

Noting the unique transformative impact of CCB programs, one CCB graduate sent a follow-up email explaining how important these degrees are to community college students who have few other options to secure a bachelor's degree. With her permission, we share her email verbatim here:

"Before committing to college, I had thought about it for some time. Aside from general life circumstances, one big reason that I did not pursue college is that, at that time, there were no 4-year degrees available in the field I was interested in [college]. I used to think about the idea of going back to school and getting my associate's degree and telling my former high school classmates. In that scenario, I could only see that there would always be a divide between those who have access [to college] and those who don't. I felt that, although I would have some education, I would remain in the realm of someone without privilege. When I did start school, I never identified as a student pursuing my associates, but a student pursuing my bachelor's. I noticed that when I graduated with my associates, I did not tell many people that specifically. I would say something like "I am in the BAS Behavioral Health program." I am much more vocal about my achievements now that I have my bachelor's degree.

I absolutely recognize the realistic side of this idea; education, in any form, is so powerful. However, I think there is a clear divide that exists between those who are able to pursue 4-year schools and those who are limited to their local community college. The movement to include BAS degrees in the more accessible community colleges works to bridge that gap, and opens up ongoing opportunity, especially as more programs are added. It greatly lifts the limitations placed on the lower class and less privileged and makes personal growth so much more possible."

Conclusion

CCB degree programs, primarily in the form of BAS but also BSN and BS, are now offered and growing in CTCs in Washington. Over the six years we studied (2018-19 to 2023-24), we found a relatively small decline in enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the overall CTC enrollment decline, with enrollment recovering to pre-pandemic levels within six years. Business, information technology, healthcare, and education have garnered the highest CCB enrollments over the years we studied, with some differences in student enrollment patterns for rural-serving and non-rural-serving institutions. Specifically, younger female students with unmet financial need are more prevalent in CCB enrollment at rural-serving than non-rural-serving institutions. Overall, the majority of CCB enrollments are female, and nearly half of all students are 30 years or older. Also, the proportion of students identifying as Black/African American and as two or more races are increasing, while white students are declining among CCB students. Black/African American students are slightly overrepresented, and Latine students are slightly underrepresented among CCB students relative to their percentage in Washington's overall population.

Completion rates of CCB programs rival transfer completion rates in the state, with 70% of CCB students compared to 72% of four-year university students completing their bachelor's degrees within four years. These completion rates set students up for well-paying jobs, particularly over a three or more year time period. Graduates of CCB programs working full-time earned a median annual wage of nearly \$65,000 one year after graduation, with earnings growing by nearly \$30,000 five years after graduation to close to \$95,000. Earnings were lower for CCB graduates working part-time and lower for female students, some racially minoritized groups, particularly Black/African American students, and graduates of rural-serving institutions. Whereas the specific factors contributing to some of these wage differentials are unknown, variation in the types of programs these student groups enroll in may contribute.

More research is needed to better understand these patterns of degree attainment, employment, and earnings. One future area for research is to compare the earnings of CCB students before they enter the bachelor's degree program with earnings after completion. While no formal research has explored this area, we hypothesize that many CCB graduates were living in precarious financial situations before earning their degree. Therefore, investigating the wage gain and return on investment of a CCB degree is important.

With respect to the qualitative findings, the 13 interviewed students/graduates shared their CCB programs had a transformative impact on their lives, careers, and communities. Students attributed online and hybrid learning formats, structured cohorts, financial aid and scholarships, leadership development, and other features of the CCB programs to their success. The CCB students/graduates spoke with pride about their career advancements, greater sense of economic security for themselves and their families, and engagement in community and public service, which they found personally satisfying. Many students overcame financial, personal, and academic challenges to complete their CCB degrees, demonstrating resilience and commitment to staying in their rural regions to live and work. These results underscore the value of CCB programs in rural regions of states where students are place bound and without other higher education options. Working adult learners are especially noteworthy beneficiaries of CCB education, attributing their success to the support they received from college faculty, staff, fellow cohort members, family and friends, and ongoing social connections they formed during their CCB programs. Further research should explore the economic and community development contributions of CCB graduates to more rural economies in Washington state and beyond.

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