TRACKING TRANSFER

Community College Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment

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The majority of community college students report a goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

33%

Only about a third of those enrolled in community colleges in the fall of 2015 transferred to four-year institutions.

48%

Fewer than half of those transfer students earned a bachelor's degree in six years.

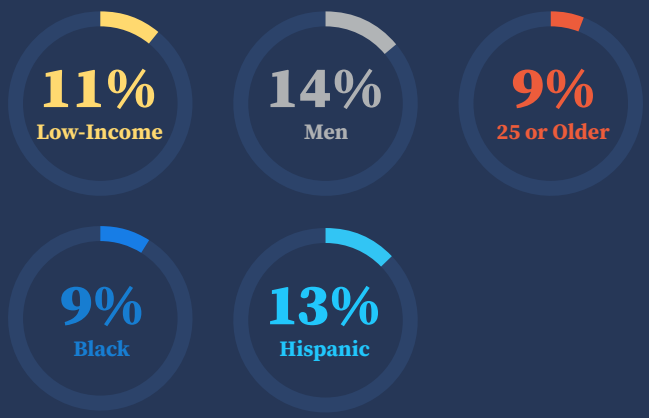
That means only

16%

of community college students attained a bachelor's degree within six years.

Rates of bachelor's completion among community college students were lower on average for low-income, male, older, Black, and Hispanic students.

Rates of bachelor's completion among community college entrants:



A bachelor's degree is increasingly necessary for securing a job that pays a family-supporting wage, yet while most community college students aspire to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, too few make it through to this goal. And because community colleges enroll nearly 40% of undergraduates, including many students from low-income backgrounds and historically underrepresented groups with limited access to a bachelor's degree, low levels of bachelor's attainment among community college entrants contribute to disparities in bachelor's attainment by income and race/ethnicity nationally.

This report, along with the companion report on four-year institutional outcomes, is designed to be used by college, university, and state-system leaders to set clear goals for eliminating disparities and expanding transfer opportunity for all students who start at a community college with the dream of earning a bachelor's degree.

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Inside This Report:
Key Findings

The analysis in this report offers several insights into whether transfer pathways from community colleges to four-year institutions are effective for all students. We discuss overall transfer rates and bachelor's completion rates of the 2015 entering cohort of community college students, and further investigate disparities in outcomes for low-income, Black, Hispanic, and older students (students 25 years or older) in comparison to national averages. We also provide a state-by-state look at these outcomes. In a companion report, *Tracking Transfer: Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment,* we examine what happens to community college students after transferring to a four-year institution by reporting disaggregated measures on the enrollment, retention, and bachelor's completion outcomes of transfer students in the 2015 four-year entering cohort. Here are some of the noteworthy findings from the analysis on the community college cohort from the current report:

1 Community college students who started in 2015 transferred to four-year institutions at the same rate as those who started in 2007; however, steady gains nationally in bachelor's completion rates mean that more of the 2015 transfer students graduated.

The overall percentage of community college students who earn bachelor's degrees in six years increased by 2 percentage points (from 14% among 2007 entrants to 16% among 2015 entrants). Increases in the cohort and the transfer-out bachelor's completion rates over time also coincide with increases in the proportion of transfer students who earn an award (often an associate degree) prior to transfer. The companion report on four-year institutional performance shows that transfer students who first complete a credential at a community college earn bachelor's degrees at a higher rate than those who do not.

2 Nationally, transfer pathways to four-year institutions from community colleges produce low transfer and bachelor's completion rates for students, especially for populations underrepresented among bachelor's degree holders.

Only about a third (33%) of students who start at a community college transfer to a four-year institution, and fewer than half (48%) of those who transfer earn a bachelor's degree in six years. Rates of transfer and bachelor's completion are lower on average for low-income, Black, and Hispanic, male, and older students: Only 11% of low-income community college starters earn a bachelor's in six years. Only 9% of Black students do so, and only 6% of older students do so.

3 Some states produce stronger outcomes relative to others, but there are no states in which at least one in four entering community college students earns a bachelor's degree.

The five states with the highest proportion of entering community college students who transfer and earn a bachelor's degree are New Jersey (21%), Illinois (20%), Maryland (19%), Oklahoma (19%), and Virginia (19%).

4 No state in which low-income, Black, or older students comprise at least 10% of the entering cohort at their community colleges produces bachelor's completion rates for these groups above the national average for all students.

Many of the states with the largest shares of entering community college students who are low-income, Black, or older also have the lowest bachelor's completion rates for these students. For example, in the states with shares of Black community college students above 25% (Mississippi, Georgia, Maryland, Louisiana, and South Carolina), the cohort bachelor's completion rates for Black students range from just 6% to 11%, well below the national average for all students of 16%.

5 State-level bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic community college entrants are better than for other groups examined, with some states having no disparities in outcomes for Hispanic students; however, states with the largest shares of Hispanic students produce Hispanic completion rates that are below the national average for all students.

New Mexico, Texas, California, Arizona, and Florida enroll the highest shares of Hispanic students in their entering community college cohorts (31% to 50%), but their cohort bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students range from just 8% to 14%. In Virginia and Wyoming, whose entering community college cohorts are 10% and 11% Hispanic, the cohort bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students (23% and 19%, respectively) exceed the national average for all students of 16%. Encouragingly, in many states there are community colleges that produce above-average cohort bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students.

6 A small but noteworthy number of colleges achieve transfer outcomes for Black or Hispanic students that are high relative both to all students at their college and to all students nationally.

Twenty-seven percent of colleges produce above-national-average bachelor's completion rates for all students and for Hispanic students (and without disparities in these rates for Hispanic students relative to those of all students at their institution), and 15% of colleges do the same for Black students. Fewer colleges produce these results with respect to transfer rates and bachelor's completion rates for low-income (33% and 14%, respectively) or older (2% and 17%, respectively) students.

7 Transfer outcomes of prior high school dual enrollment students are stronger than those of students who start college without having taken any dual enrollment courses, suggesting the potential of dual enrollment to pave the way to bachelor's completion.

Students entering community college with prior dual enrollment (PDE) transfer and complete a bachelor's degree at a rate (35%) that is nearly twice that of students without PDE (16%). And among Black and Hispanic students, those with PDE transfer and complete bachelor's degrees at three times the rate as students without PDE (28% and 31% versus 10% and 13%, respectively). However, Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented among those who participate in dual enrollment.

Key Findings From Companion Report *Tracking Four-Year Institution Transfer Performance*

In a companion report, we track transfer opportunity provided by four-year institutions nationally that receive community college transfer students. **Here are nine major takeaways from that analysis:**

1 Community college transfer pathways are a major source of enrollments and diversity at four-year institutions.

2 Community college transfer students who enroll in very selective four-year institutions are more likely to be low-income, Black, and Hispanic in comparison to their non-transfer peers (those who enter as first-time freshman students).

3 Outcomes for community college transfer students after they arrive at four-year institutions are low overall and even lower for low-income, Black, Native American, and older transfer students.

4 Transfer students who earn a pre-transfer community college award have much stronger post-transfer outcomes.

5 Students who transfer to four-year institutions from community colleges are retained at higher rates than students who transfer from other four-year institutions.

6 Among different types of four-year institutions, for-profit colleges and predominately online institutions (POIs) have the weakest transfer outcomes.

7 Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) exhibit strong transfer outcomes.

8 Community college transfer students who graduate are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree in a STEM field than graduates who are not transfer students.

9 Among public four-year institutions, a handful of states have strong results overall without gaps for low-income, Black, Hispanic, and older community college transfer students.

Introduction

Community colleges play a central role as vehicles for social mobility. They have substantially broadened access to higher education for students from all backgrounds and, in doing so, have increased attainment of college degrees, leading to greater economic well-being for many. A fundamental part of this role consists of paving the way to bachelor's degrees by preparing and supporting students to transfer to four-year institutions. The transfer mission of community colleges is critically important: Most community college students report wanting to earn a bachelor's degree, and the majority of well-paying jobs in the United States require one (Carnevale et al., 2018). However, the use of transfer pathways remains low nationwide: Only one in every three students who starts at a community college transfers to a four-year institution, and too few of those who do transfer earn a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2022). Moreover, despite the potential of transfer as a path to a bachelor's degree for historically underserved students, little data is available on transfer outcomes of students from particular racial or income backgrounds or those from other nontraditional groups such as older adults. Having information on transfer outcomes disaggregated by income, race/ethnicity, age, and other characteristics is critical to motivate and guide colleges and policymakers to improve fair access to transfer to four-year institutions and to increase the chances of successful bachelor's degree completion for all students.

In this report, we use National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data to measure the performance of community colleges in enabling students who start at these institutions to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. We report rates[1]—disaggregated by student and institutional characteristics—of student transfer and degree completion after six years for community colleges nationally and by state for the fall 2015 community college entry cohort. Of particular interest are the transfer outcomes of low-income, Black, Hispanic, and older students, and others who are underrepresented among bachelor's degree earners. When describing disparities, we focus on institutional and state performance instead of student deficits, and we benchmark performance to national, state, and institutional averages for all students. This report focuses on students who start at a community college. A companion report, titled *Tracking Transfer: Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment*, uses NSC data to examine outcomes (again, disaggregated by income, race/ethnicity, and age) of students who transfer into a four-year institution.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CC–Community College
DE–Dual Enrollment
FTIC–First Time Ever in College
IPEDS–Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
NSC– National Student Clearinghouse
PDE–Prior Dual Enrollment

Data and Definitions

Data Sample

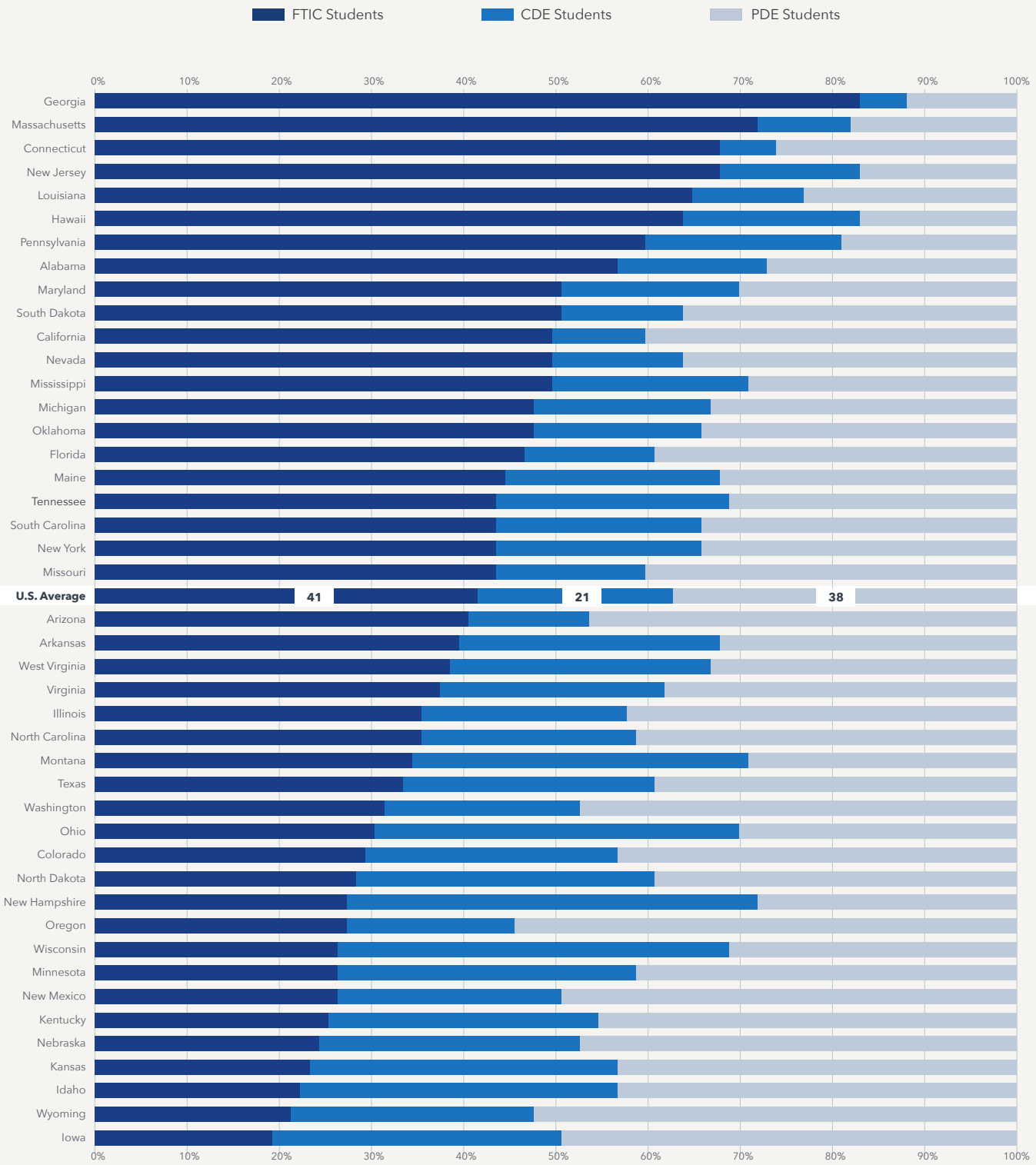
To measure the performance of community colleges in enabling students who start college at their institutions to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree, we use National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data on degree-seeking students who entered a community college in the fall of 2015. Our sample of community colleges comprises all state-defined community colleges, excluding branch campuses, military colleges, less-than-two-year colleges, and adult and career technical centers and colleges, as these institutions are not predominantly transfer oriented. As a result, our data include enrollment records for 847 public two-year colleges, for which NSC reports more than 95% student enrollment data coverage rates during this study's tracking period.[2]

NSC data enable us to distinguish first-time-ever-in-college (FTIC) students, that is, students with no other postsecondary experience, from both current dual enrollment (CDE) students and prior dual enrollment (PDE) students. CDE students are students who are still in high school or who are younger than 17.7 years old at the beginning of the fall 2015 term. PDE students are those entering community college for the first time after high school in fall 2015 but who had some postsecondary enrollment prior to high school completion or while they were younger than 17.7 years old.[3]

Dual enrollment students make up a large share of entering community college students nationally. Of the 1,636,171 students in the community college fall 2015 entry cohort, 41% are FTIC students, 21% are CDE students, and 38% are PDE students. Importantly, there is large variation in the cohort composition across states. *Figure 1* shows the distribution of students by dual enrollment status in the cohort across states. In Georgia, 82% are FTIC students, whereas in Iowa only 19% are FTIC students and 51% are PDE students. *See Figure 1 on the next page.*

The analysis in this report focuses on FTIC students (and generally excludes CDE and PDE students) because these students share a similar starting point in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Focusing on results for FTIC students also allows us to make historical comparison with findings from six prior cohorts that use the same metrics.[4] However, given the large increase in dual enrollment participation over recent years and the potential for dual enrollment programs to serve as an equitable on-ramp to postsecondary education (Fink & Jenkins, 2023), we explore the transfer outcomes of students with prior dual enrollment experience separately in the penultimate section of this report.

Figure 1. **Fall 2015 Community College Entry Cohort Dual Enrollment Status Composition by State**



NOTE: Figure restricted to states that have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students. We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Indiana, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont. States sorted in descending order by share of FTIC students. FTIC = first time ever in college. CDE = current dual enrollment. PDE = prior dual enrollment.

Student Characteristics

We present definitions of the student characteristics examined in this report below.[5] *Table 1* provides descriptive statistics for these characteristics among FTIC students in the fall 2015 community college entry cohort.

- **Transfer student:** We define a student as a transfer student if they were degree-seeking and started at a community college in the fall 2015 term and subsequently enrolled at a four-year institution in the six calendar years following community college entry (i.e., tracked through August 2021). Of the 670,794 FTIC students in the fall 2015 entry cohort, 33% (219,118 students) transferred to a four-year institution within six years.

- **Student race/ethnicity and gender:** We use data provided by NSC on student racial/ethnic group and gender at the start of the fall 2015 term. Over the last several years, NSC has strengthened its coverage of student racial/ethnic demographic information. In our sample, only 8% of students are missing race/ethnicity information and only 4% are missing gender information.

- **Age group:** NSC data provides the student age as of January 1, 2016. We use this to classify students into four age groups: students who were 17 years old or younger at that time, students who were 18 or 19 years old, students who were 20 to 24 years old, and students who were 25 years old or older. We also refer to the latter group as older students. The large majority of FTIC students and transfer students are made up of students between 18 and 19 years old. Older students comprise 12% of the FTIC students and only 6% of the transfer students.

- **Neighborhood income:** To capture student income, we use a proxy measure of student neighborhood income that links student home addresses to U.S. Census tract-level estimates of household median income. To best approximate household socioeconomic origins, NSC uses the first U.S. home address that was reported for each student. Income data for each tract is taken from the U.S. Census 2009-2014 American Community Survey five-year estimates. Students from Census tracts with median household incomes in the bottom 40% nationally are identified as low-income, students from Census tracts with median household incomes in the top 40% nationally are identified as high-income, with the remaining middle 20% nationally identified as middle-income. It is important to recognize that the procedure yields a higher rate of missing data than other student-level variables: 12% of the FTIC fall 2015 entry cohort is missing the income proxy information. *See Table 1 on the next page.*

Table 1. **FTIC Community College Student Characteristics**

Characteristic	Fall 2015 Entry Cohort (*n* = 670,794)	Transfer Students in the Cohort (*n* = 219,118)
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	**5%**	**7%**
Black	**14%**	**12%**
Hispanic	**24%**	**22%**
International student	**1%**	**1%**
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	**0.4%**	**0.4%**
Native American	**0.8%**	**0.8%**
Two or more races	**4%**	**4%**
White	**43%**	**49%**
Missing	**8%**	**2%**
Gender		
Female	**49%**	**54%**
Male	**46%**	**44%**
Missing	**4%**	**2%**
Student Neighborhood Income		
Low	**36%**	**29%**
Middle	**21%**	**20%**
High	**32%**	**40%**
Missing	**12%**	**11%**
Age in Years		
17 or younger	**0.1%**	**0.1%**
18–19	**64%**	**75%**
20–24	**23%**	**18%**
25 or older	**12%**	**6%**

NOTE: Some percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Transfer Outcome Definitions

To measure community college transfer outcomes, we track the progress of FTIC students in the fall 2015 community college entry cohort for six calendar years.[6] Using this cohort and timeframe, we compute the following transfer and degree outcomes for community colleges nationally and within states by student and institutional characteristics.

- **Transfer-out rate:** the rate at which FTIC students who start at a community college transfer to a four-year institution within six calendar years of their community college entry. (Students in the fall 2015 cohort are tracked through August 2021.)

- **Transfer-with-award rate:** the rate at which FTIC students who transfer to a four-year institution within six years complete a certificate or associate degree at any institution prior to their earliest four-year institution enrollment.

- **Transfer-out bachelor's completion rate:** the rate at which transfer students earn a bachelor's degree from any four-year institution within six years of their community college entry.

- **Community college cohort bachelor's completion rate:** the rate at which FTIC students who start at a community college transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree from any four-year institution within six years of their community college entry.

The transfer-out rate can be interpreted as a measure of community colleges' effectiveness in helping students gain access to a four-year institution. The transfer-with-award rate is significant for both students and community colleges, as it can be a predictor of future success in completing a bachelor's degree. Many transfer pathways are designed with a certificate or associate degree as a stepping stone; in fact, prior research suggests that more structured transfer pathways increase the likelihood that a student will earn an associate degree (Baker, 2016; Boatman & Soliz, 2018). The transfer-out bachelor's completion rate captures how effectively community colleges and their four-year partners enable transfer students to navigate through to bachelor's completion. Finally, the community college cohort bachelor's completion rate is the product of the transfer-out rate and the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate. To substantially increase the cohort bachelor's completion rate, college and university partners need to both increase the number of students who transfer and the number of transferring students who complete a bachelor's degree. Note that our analysis focuses on outcomes of fall 2015 entry students who transferred to a four-year institution; it does not include students who earned a bachelor's degree from the growing number of community colleges that offer the degree (in limited fields).[7] In discussing our findings, we begin by comparing national outcomes of the 2015 entry cohort with those of earlier entry cohorts.

National Community College Transfer Outcomes

Community college transfer outcomes continue to be low and inequitable across racial and income groups.

Nationally, transfer outcomes continue to be low, although some measures have increased modestly over time. *Figure 2* displays transfer outcome trends over multiple entry cohorts of community college students. The transfer-out rate of FTIC community college students remained roughly unchanged for students starting college between 2007 and 2015, with only about a third of students transferring to a four-year institution within six years of enrollment. This rate is far below the rate at which students say they want to transfer—estimates from surveys of entering community college students indicate that about 80% of them aspire to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree (CCCSE, 2023; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). While the transfer-out rate has been flat over time, there have been steady national gains in both the rate at which community college students complete a credential prior to transfer (transfer-with-award rate) and the rate at which transfer students complete a bachelor's degree (transfer-out bachelor's completion rate). Combining the transfer-out and transfer-out bachelor's completion rate measures, the cohort bachelor's completion rate dipped to a low of 12% among fall 2011 entrants and has since increased to 16% among fall 2015 entrants. *See Figures 2, 3, and 4 on the following pages.*

Using fall 2015 cohort data, we examine outcomes and equity gaps by race/ethnicity, income, gender, and age group. We focus on outcomes among a set of student subgroups that have been historically underserved by higher education and that are underrepresented among adults with a bachelor's degree, including Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander students, as well as men, low-income students, and students who are 25 years or older at entry (Pell Institute, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Figure 3 displays transfer outcomes by student subgroup. Black, low-income, and older students transfer and complete a bachelor's degree at much lower rates than students overall (9%, 11%, and 6%, respectively, compared to 16% for all students). Some students, such as those who start community college for the first time as older adults seeking a workforce credential, may not intend to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree. This may explain lower transfer-out rates (the transfer-out rate for older students is 17%, compared to 33% for all students), but even among older students who transferred to a four-year institution, only 36% complete a bachelor's degree (compared to 48% for all students). In contrast, there is a smaller gap in the transfer-out rate between Black students and students overall (4 percentage points). Yet there is a very large gap in the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate between Black students and all students (16 percentage points).

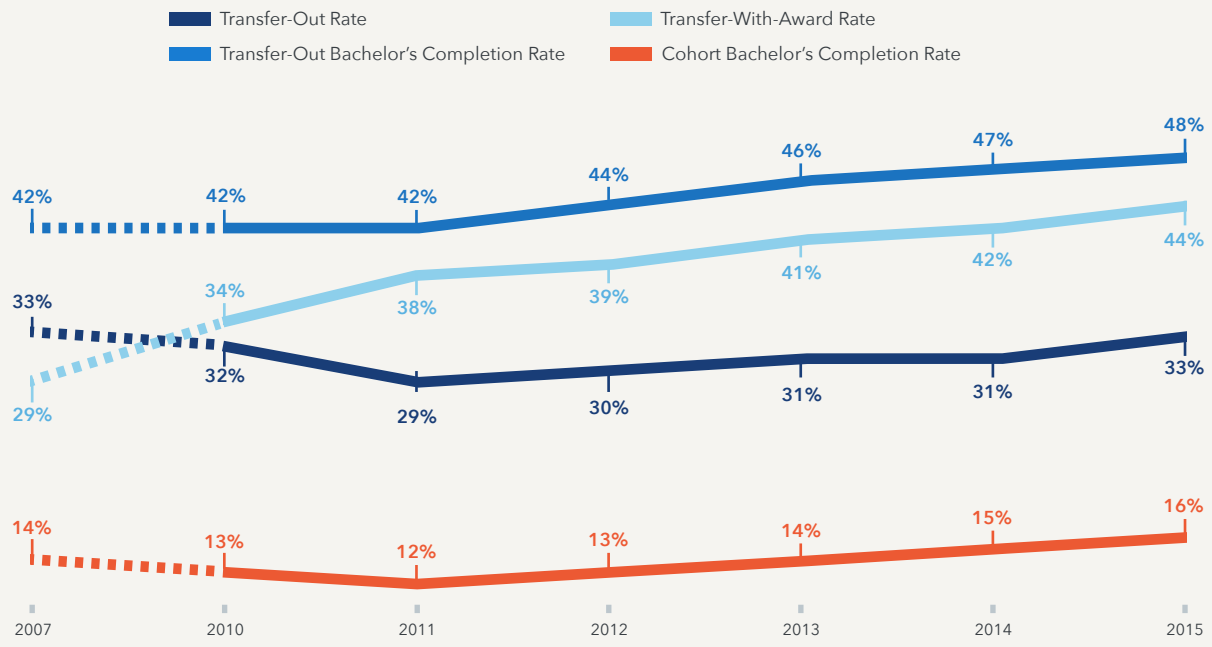
Figure 4 further breaks down transfer outcomes for student subgroups by gender. It shows that across all transfer outcomes, racial/ethnic and income differences are stratified by gender, with the disparities in outcomes being more acute among male students. For example, 48% of all transfer students completed a bachelor's degree, whereas 34% of Black women and 30% of Black men who transferred went on to complete a bachelor's degree. Transfer-with-award rates are higher among certain

subgroups, in particular Hispanic and older students (51% and 47%, *Figure 3*). More than half of Hispanic women who transferred completed a credential at a community college before transferring (54%, *Figure 4*).

In the next section on state-by-state outcomes, we narrow our analysis to Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older students, as these are subgroups with generally low transfer outcomes and a history of large disparities in educational outcomes. For these subgroups, we focus on the transfer-out rate, the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate, and the cohort bachelor's completion rate. To assess equity in transfer outcomes, we compare the results of these subgroups to those of all students.

See Figures 2, 3, and 4 on the following pages.

Figure 2. **Trends in National Transfer Outcome Rates:** ***Fall 2007 to Fall 2015 FTIC Community College Entrants***



NOTE: Transfer outcomes for the 2015 entry cohort are based on authors' calculations. Transfer outcomes for the 2010 to 2014 entry cohorts are from National Student Clearinghouse's *Tracking Transfer* reports (NSCRC, 2022). Transfer outcomes for the 2007 entry cohort are from Jenkins and Fink (2016).

Figure 3. **Six-Year Transfer Outcome Rates:** ***Fall 2015 FTIC Community College Entrants***

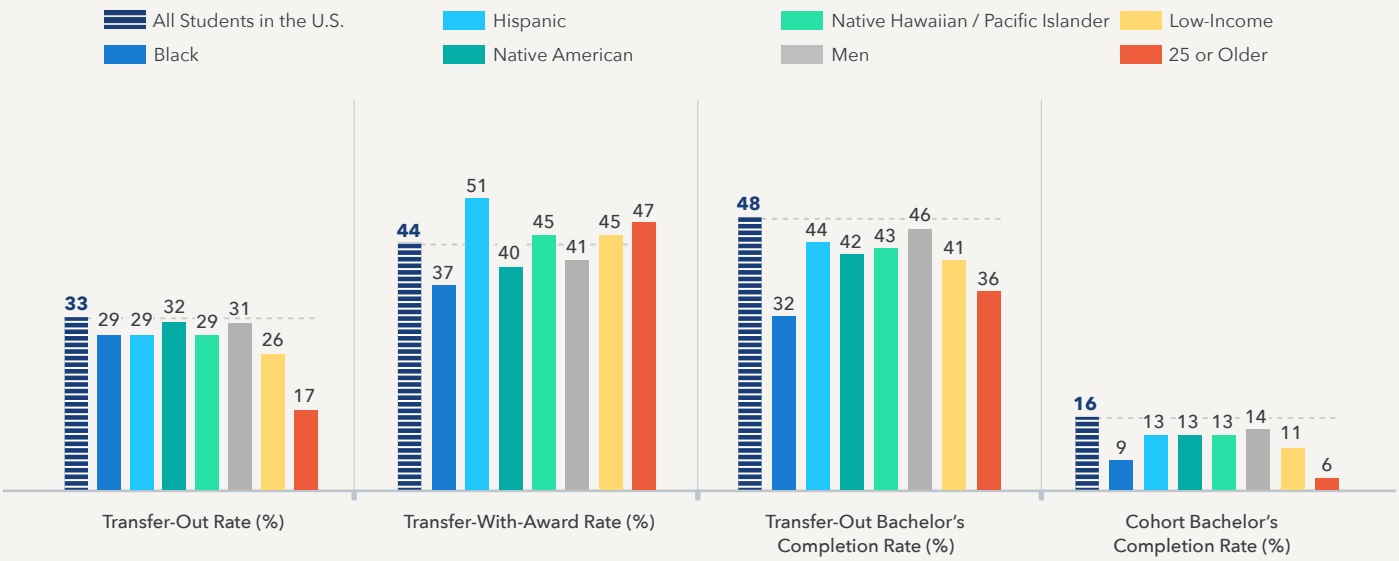
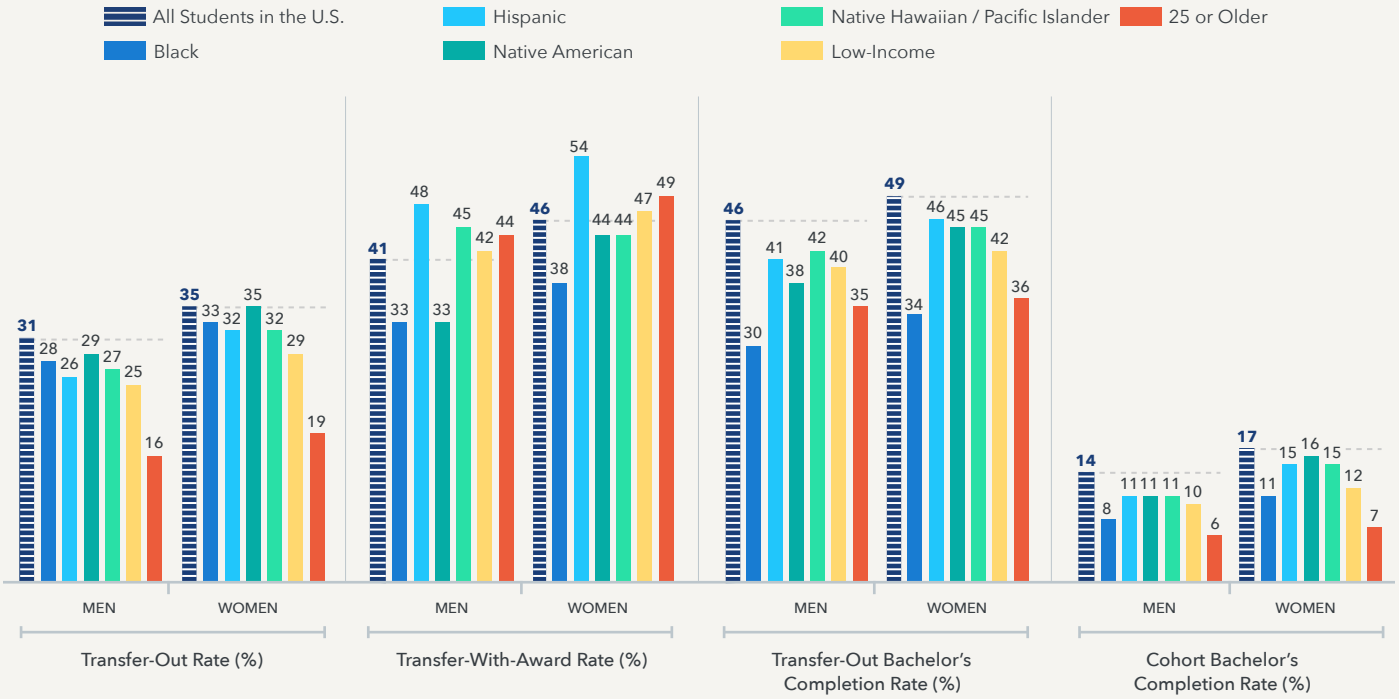


Figure 4. **Six-Year Transfer Outcome Rates:** ***Fall 2015 FTIC Community College Entrants by Gender***



Community College Transfer Outcomes by State

State Trends Over Time

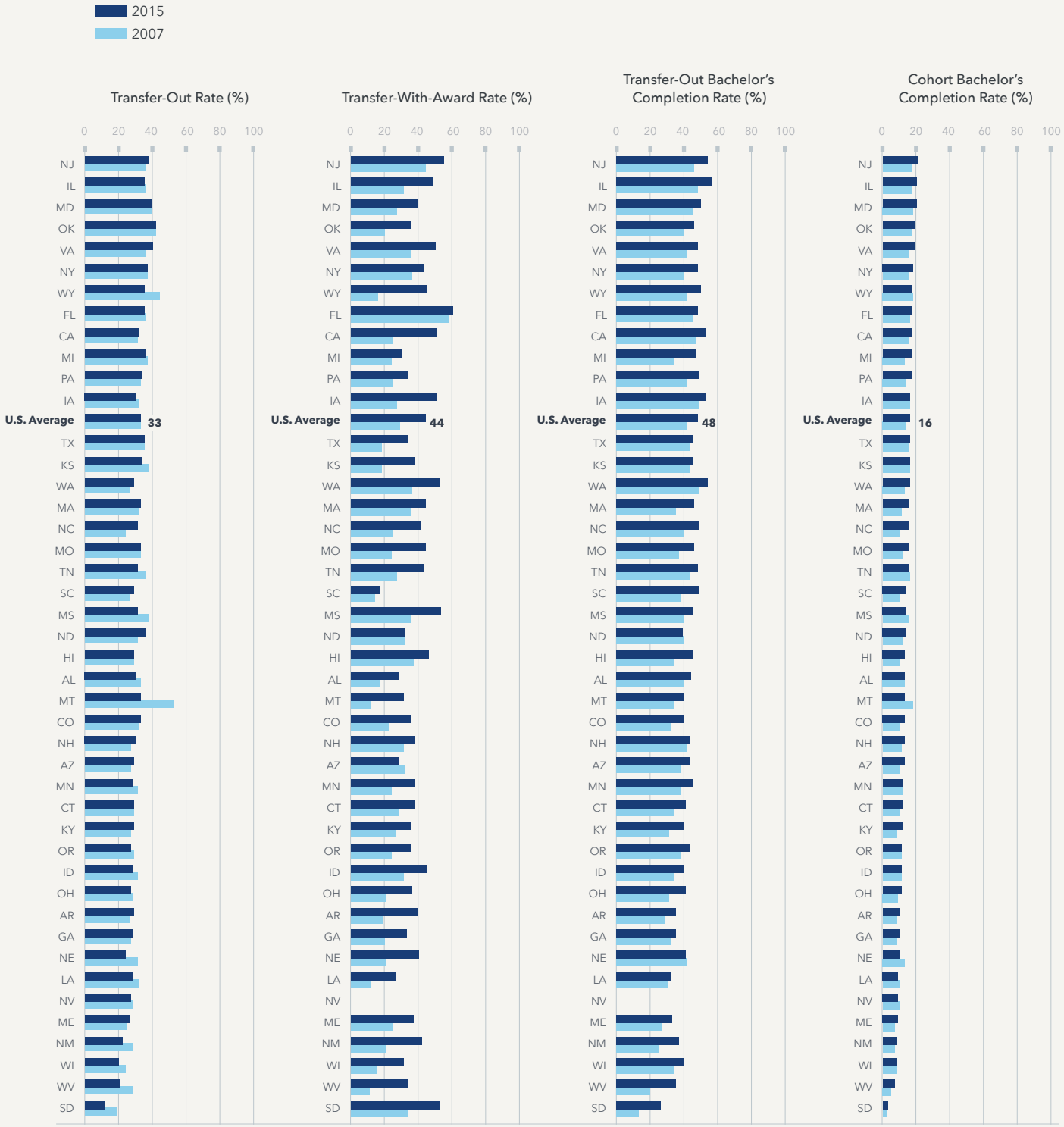
Bachelor's completion rates for transfer students have increased in most states, but the rates at which students transfer to begin with have remained flat over time.

Next, we examine state trends in community college transfer outcomes among FTIC students by comparing average outcomes across states of the fall 2007 and fall 2015 community college entry cohorts. *Figure 5* presents average transfer outcome rates for the 2007 (light blue bars) and the 2015 (dark blue bars) cohort in each state. All panels in the figure are sorted from the state with the highest to the lowest cohort bachelor's completion rate for the 2015 cohort. To comply with data protection and confidentiality agreements, we include only states that have three or more community colleges, each of which enrolls at least ten students. (*Table 2* presents outcome rates for the 2015 cohort in tabular form.)

Many states show gains in the rates at which transfer students earn credentials before and after transferring to a four-year institution, but fewer states show improvements in the rates at which students transfer in the first place. For example, relative to the 2007 entry cohort, North Carolina saw the largest increase in the transfer-out rate (7 percentage points), going from 24% to 31% in 2015. This is followed by North Dakota, with a 5-percentage-point increase. The five states with the lowest transfer-out rates for the fall 2015 cohort—Nebraska, New Mexico, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and South Dakota—are also states where the transfer-out rate declined. However, three of these states—West Virginia, New Mexico, and South Dakota—saw the largest improvements in the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate relative to the 2007 cohort, with increases ranging from 13 to 15 percentage points. In these three states, fewer students transferred to a four-year institution than before, but those who did so were more likely to complete a bachelor's degree.

Despite increases in transfer-out bachelor's completion rates in many states, transfer-out rates have generally been flat. As a result, there have been only very small gains in the cohort bachelor's completion rate in most states. North Carolina had the largest improvement, with a cohort bachelor's completion rate of 15% for the 2015 cohort, which represents a 6-percentage-point gain relative to the 2007 cohort. However, other states had declines in their cohort completion rates; Montana and Nebraska, for example, had declines of 5 and 3 percentage points respectively. *See Figure 5 and Table 2 on the following pages.*

Figure 5. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates by State, 2007 and 2015 Cohorts Compared**



NOTE: Transfer outcomes for the 2007 cohort are from Jenkins and Fink (2016). Figure panels restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-with-award and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates). We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Indiana, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont entirely. States sorted in descending order by 2015 cohort bachelor's completion rate.

Table 2. Average Transfer Outcome Rates by State, 2015 Cohort

	Transfer-Out Rate (%)	Transfer-With-Award Rate (%)	Transfer-Out Bachelor's Completion Rate (%)	Cohort Bachelor's Completion Rate (%)
U.S. Average	**33**	**44**	**48**	**16**
Alabama	30	28	44	13
Arizona	29	28	43	13
Arkansas	29	39	35	10
California	32	51	53	17
Colorado	33	35	40	13
Connecticut	29	38	41	12
Delaware	*	*	*	*
Florida	35	60	48	17
Georgia	28	33	35	10
Hawaii	29	46	45	13
Idaho	28	45	40	11
Illinois	35	48	56	20
Indiana	*	*	*	*
Iowa	30	51	53	16
Kansas	34	38	45	16
Kentucky	29	35	40	12
Louisiana	28	26	32	9
Maine	26	37	33	9
Maryland	39	39	50	20
Massachusetts	33	44	46	15
Michigan	36	30	47	17
Minnesota	28	38	45	12
Mississippi	31	53	45	14
Missouri	33	44	46	15
Montana	33	31	40	13
Nebraska	24	40	41	10
Nevada	27	*	*	9
New Hampshire	30	38	43	13
New Jersey	38	55	54	21
New Mexico	22	42	37	8
New York	37	43	48	18
North Carolina	31	41	49	15
North Dakota	36	32	39	14
Ohio	27	36	41	11
Oklahoma	42	35	46	19
Oregon	27	35	43	11
Pennsylvania	34	34	49	17
Rhode Island	*	*	*	*
South Carolina	29	17	49	14
South Dakota	12	52	26	3
Tennessee	31	43	48	15
Texas	35	34	45	16
Utah	*	*	*	*
Vermont	*	*	*	*
Virginia	40	50	48	19
Washington	29	52	54	16
West Virginia	21	34	35	7
Wisconsin	20	31	40	8
Wyoming	35	45	50	17

NOTE: Cells for states that, in the 2015 cohort, have fewer than three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-with-award and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates), are marked with an asterisk.

State Outcomes Among Subgroups

Among racial, income, and age groups, some states show larger disparities in transfer outcomes than others.

Next, we examine FTIC community college students' transfer outcomes by state and student characteristics. *Figures 6–9* display average transfer outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, and students 25 years or older. To reflect the gap between a given subgroup and all students nationally, each figure panel includes at the top the transfer outcome rate average for all FTIC students nationally. Results are sorted relative to the share of students from the subgroup in the entry cohort of the state (shown in the left-most panel), with the state at the top having the largest share of students from the given subgroup in the entry cohort and the state at the bottom having the lowest. Again, to comply with data protection and confidentiality agreements, we include only states that have three or more community colleges, each of which enrolls at least ten students from the subgroup.

Community college transfer outcomes by state: Black students

Equity gaps for Black transfer students are widespread across states, driven by low bachelor's completion rates. *Figure 6* shows gaps for states by comparing Black transfer outcomes to outcomes among all community college students nationally. While North Dakota and New Mexico outperform the national average on some transfer outcomes for Black students, Black students in these states make up a relatively small share of the entering community cohort (9% and 2%, respectively). Looking at states where Black students comprise 10% or more of the entering cohort, there are no states that have closed transfer gaps (compared to the national average) for Black community college transfer students. Most states show larger gaps in the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate for Black students compared to the transfer-out rate for Black students. And the cohort bachelor's completion rate among Black students for every state with a sizable share (10% or more) of Black students is below the national average, with rates for Black students in 19 states in the single digits.

Community college transfer outcomes by state: Hispanic students

There is large variation across states in transfer outcomes and equity gaps for Hispanic students. In Virginia, where Hispanic students account for 11% of the entering community college cohort, 23% of Hispanic students transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, well above the national average for all students of 16% and the Virginia average of 19%. Maryland and Arkansas, both of which have a 10% share of community college entrants who are Hispanic, have Hispanic cohort bachelor's completion rates of 17% and 16%, respectively. Neither of these states shows a gap in this rate compared to the national average, but in Maryland there is a disparity compared to all students statewide (who have a 19% bachelor's completion rate). In Arkansas, only 10% of all community college entrants transfer and complete a bachelor's degree. New York and Washington State, with 25% and 13% shares of entering Hispanic students, are close to the national average, each with 15% of Hispanic students transferring and completing a bachelor's degree.

Compared to the national averages for all students, some states show stronger transfer-out rates but lower transfer-out bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students (e.g., New York, Oklahoma, Arkansas), while other states show the opposite pattern with stronger transfer-out bachelor's completion rates and lower transfer-out rates for Hispanic students (California, Illinois, Washington).

Community college transfer outcomes by state: Low-income students

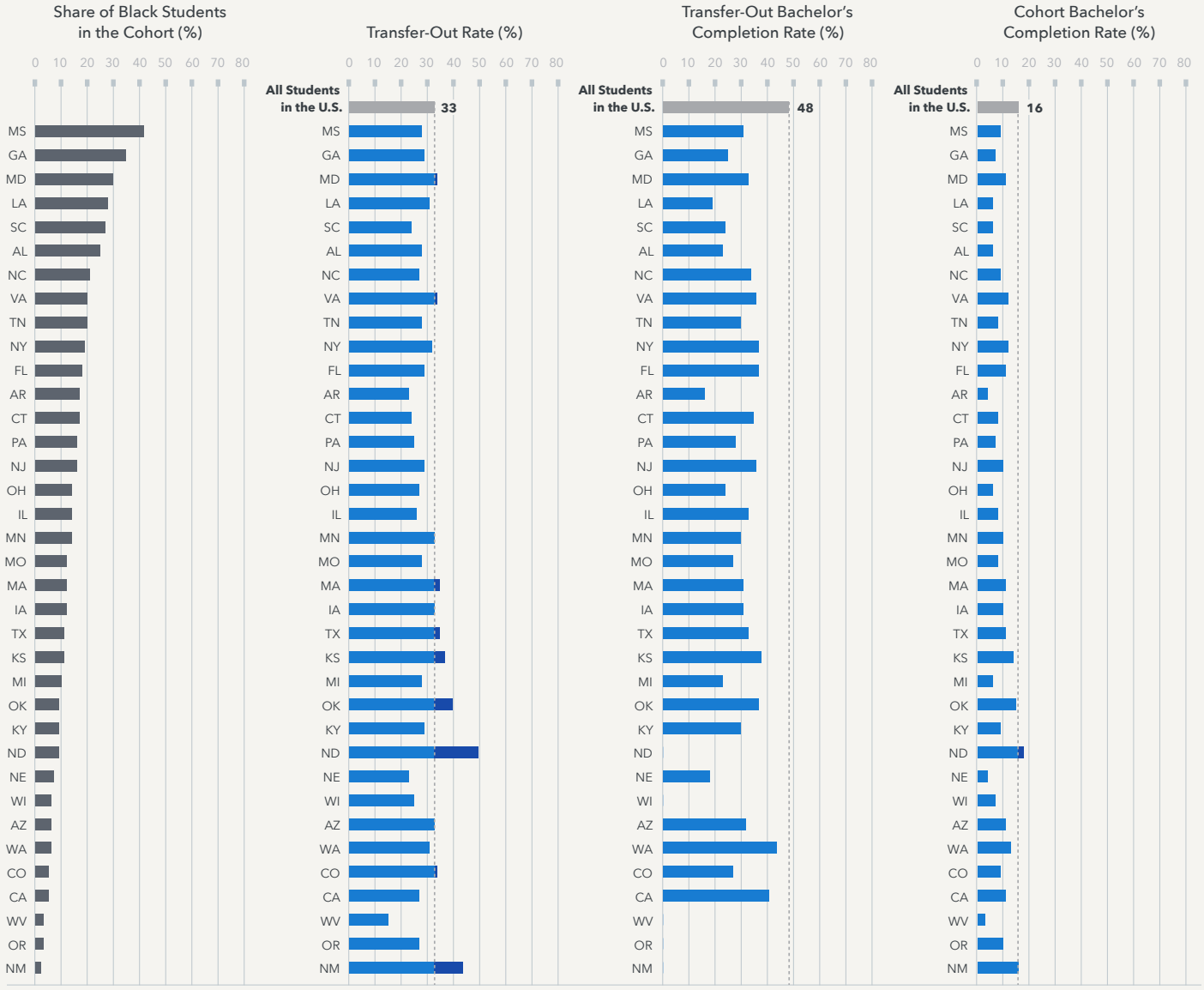
There is no state where low-income students transfer and complete bachelor's degrees above the national average for all students. Students from low-income neighborhoods comprise a large share of community college entrants—more than a third in most states and more than half in 15 states. And while 13 states show above-average cohort bachelor's completion rates for all students (*Figure 5*), in none of these 13 states as well as any other is the cohort bachelor's completion rate for low-income students above the national average for all students (16%). Similar to outcomes for Black students, gaps between low-income students and the national average for all students are widest in many states for the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate. In 15 states, fewer than one in 10 entering community college students from a low-income neighborhood transfer and complete a bachelor's degree.

Community college transfer outcomes by state: Older students

Across states, students 25 or older have some of the lowest transfer outcomes. In nearly all states, there are very large gaps in transfer outcomes between older students and all students nationally. With older students transferring at about half the rate of the national average in most states, it could be that older students are less frequently interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree. However, even among older students who transfer to a four-year institution, all states have lower transfer-out bachelor's completion rates for students 25 or older compared to the national average for all students.

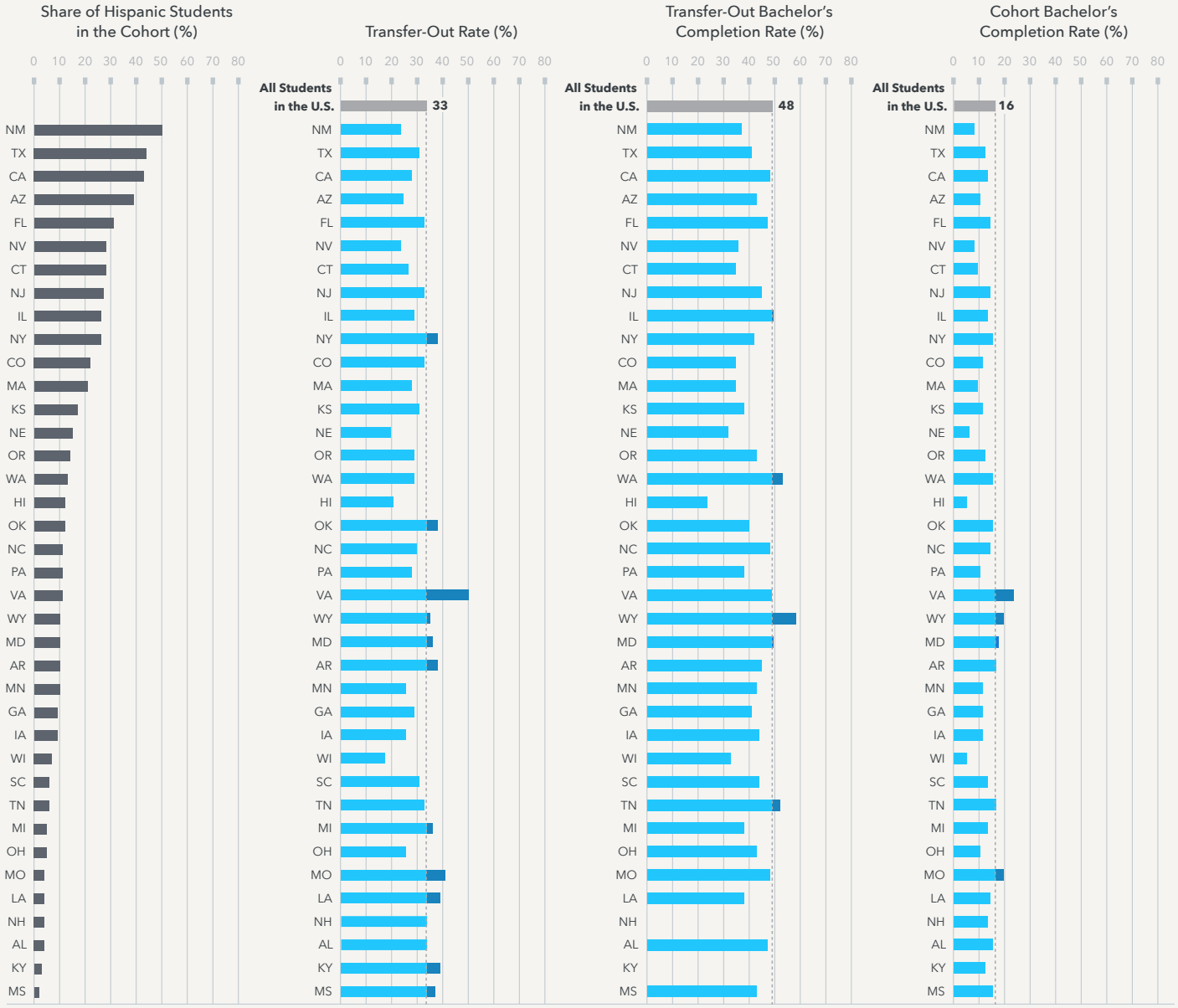
See Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9 on the following pages.

Figure 6. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates by State:** ***Black Students***



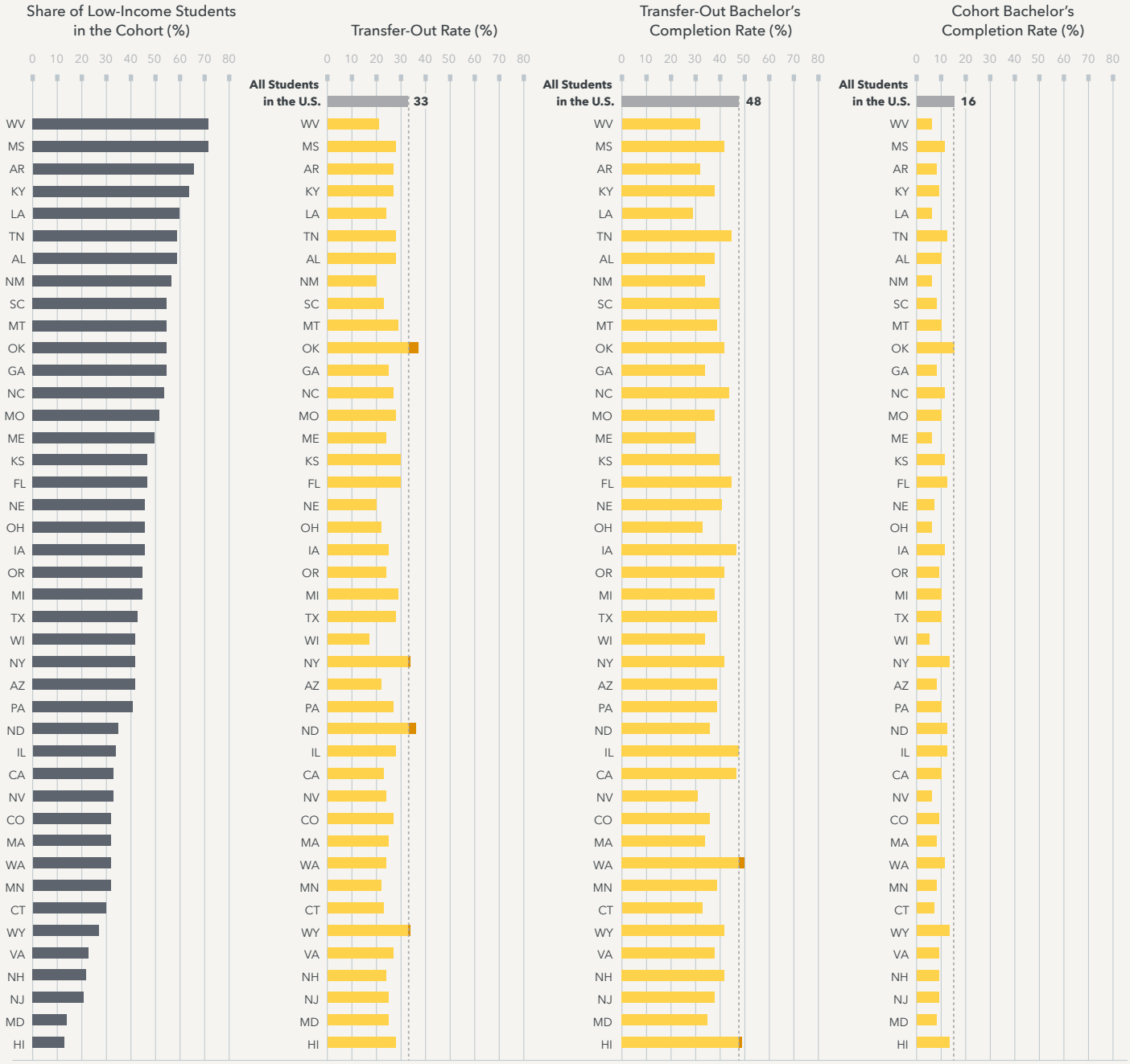
NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. States sorted in descending order by proportion of students in the subgroup. We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming entirely. Gray bars at tops of panels and vertical dashed lines in panels indicate the U.S. average for all students.

Figure 7. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates by State:** ***Hispanic Students***



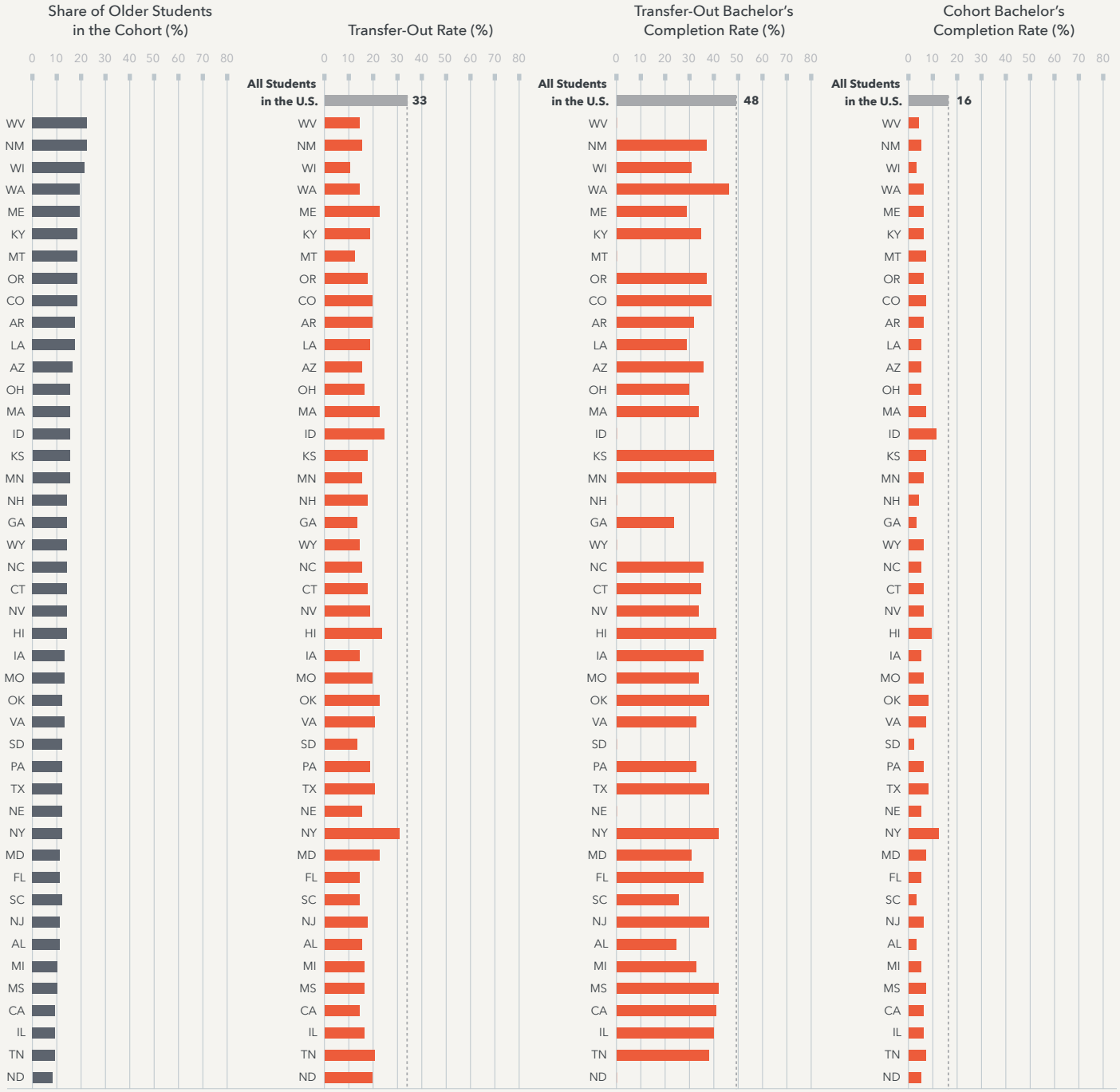
NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. States sorted in descending order by proportion of students in the subgroup. We thus exclude the states of Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming entirely. Gray bars at tops of panels and vertical dashed lines in panels indicate the U.S. average for all students.

Figure 8. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates by State:** ***Low-Income Students***



NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. States sorted in descending order by proportion of students in the subgroup. We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, and Vermont entirely. Gray bars at tops of panels and vertical dashed lines in panels indicate the U.S. average for all students.

Figure 9. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates by State:** ***Older Students***



NOTE: Older students are defined as age 25 years or older in January 2016. Figure panels restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Indiana, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont entirely. States sorted in descending order by proportion of students in the subgroup. Gray bars at tops of panels and vertical dashed lines in panels indicate the U.S. average for all students.

Community College Transfer Effectiveness Metrics

Thus far, we have provided national- and state-level findings on community college transfer outcomes overall and for priority subgroups of students. In this section, we examine variation in community college institutional performance on transfer outcomes.

Subgroup Variation Within States

Substantial variation within states in community college transfer performance reveals top performers in many states.

Figures 10–13 show, for each college in each state, community college transfer outcomes for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older students, respectively, in the fall 2015 FTIC entry cohort. The red dots in each panel represent the median community college outcome in each state for the subgroup, and states in each figure are sorted from that with the highest to the lowest transfer-out median rate. To protect data confidentiality and ensure that the college-level outcomes are not the result of small sample sizes, results are restricted to states with at least five community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 30 students in the subgroup. We include only colleges with at least 30 students in the subgroup to ensure that observed outliers are not the result of small numbers of transfers (e.g., three out of a total of four transfer students completing a bachelor's degree would yield a completion rate of 75%); this allows us to better highlight cases where colleges are effective in getting more students from a given subgroup transferred into a four-year institution and completing a bachelor's degree.

In many states, there are some colleges with transfer-out and transfer completion rates among their Black students that are well above the national average for all students. In Michigan and Ohio, which have wide variation in Black community college transfer outcomes, there is nevertheless at least one community college with a Black student transfer-out rate exceeding 80% and at least one community college with a Black student transfer-out bachelor's completion rate over 90% (*Figure 10*). Regarding the community college cohort bachelor's completion rate, we observe that, while the majority of colleges across states cluster around the 10%–20% range, there are nine states with one or two outlier community colleges in which between 40% and 70% of entering Black students transfer and complete a bachelor's degree in six years (well above the national average of 16% for all students).

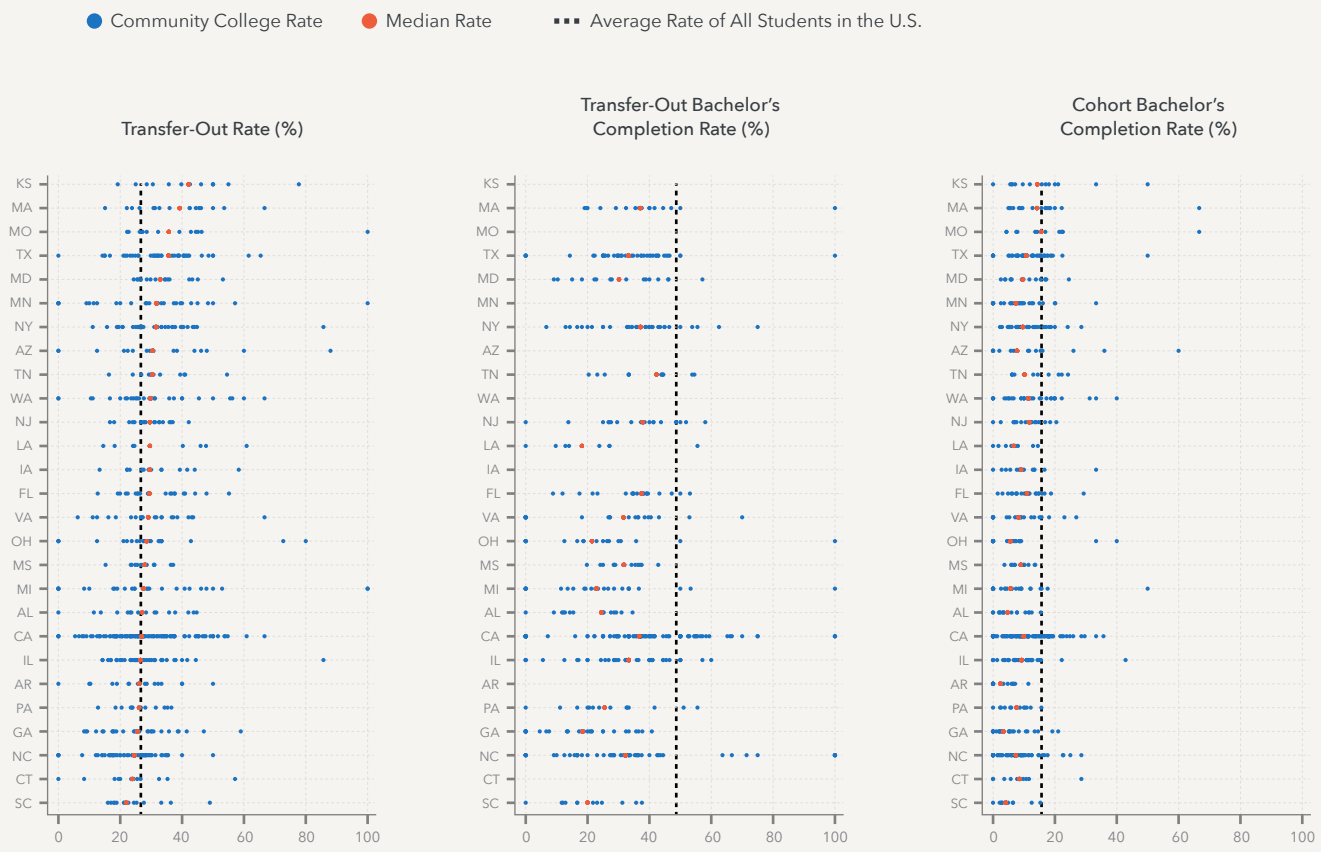
In most states, there are many colleges with high transfer-out and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students that are above the national average for all students. Compared to the community college outcomes for Black students, we observe more positive outlier colleges with transfer outcomes for Hispanic students that are well above the state median for the subgroup (*Figure 11*). Almost every state has some colleges with transfer-out rates and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students that are above the national averages for all students. And most states have multiple community colleges in which 20% or more of entering Hispanic students transfer and complete a bachelor's degree—well above the national average of 16% for all students.

For low-income students, there is relatively less within-state variation in transfer outcomes compared to the Black and Hispanic subgroups. This is especially the case for the cohort bachelor's completion rate, for which colleges tend to be concentrated around the state median for the subgroup (*Figure 12*). However, in some states (e.g., Illinois and Maryland), we observe multiple stronger-performing outlier colleges in the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate among low-income students.

This suggests that while colleges often struggle to get their low-income students to transfer, some are finding more effective ways to ensure that their low-income students who do transfer are on paths leading to bachelor's degrees.

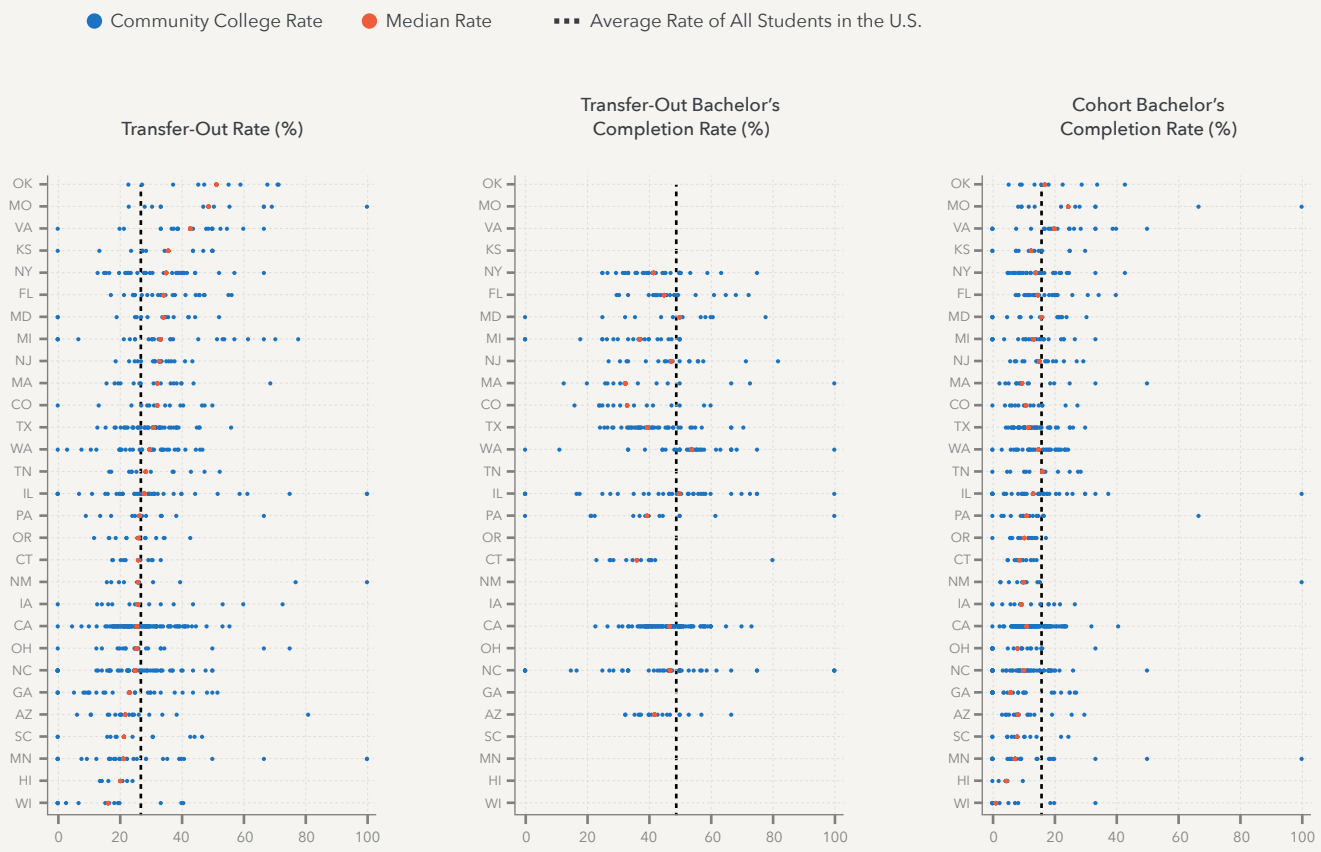
Across most states, community colleges' transfer-out and cohort bachelor's completion rates for older students are low, with modest variation. Similar to what we observe for low-income students, outcomes across and within states suggest that most community colleges struggle to get their older students to transfer and to complete a bachelor's degree (*Figure 13*). Examining variation in transfer-out bachelor's completion rates is only possible in a few states with enough colleges enrolling at least 30 transfer students who are 25 years or older in the 2015 entry cohort. Colleges in these states (Massachusetts, New York, Texas, New Jersey, Florida, California) show a wide range of transfer-out bachelor's completion rates among older students. *See Figures 10–13 on the following pages.*

Figure 10. **Distribution of Community College Transfer Outcome Rates by State:** ***Black Students***



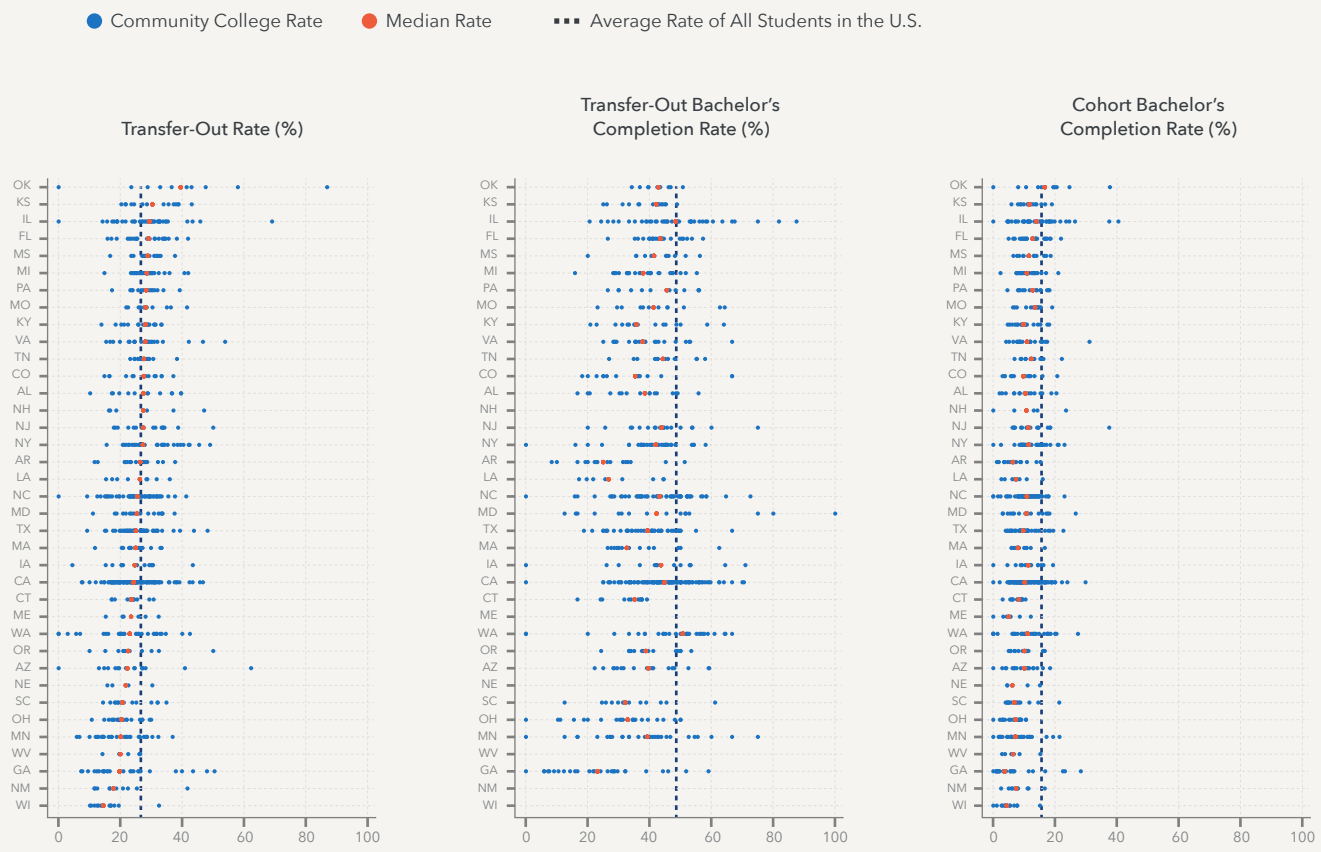
NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states with at least five community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 30 students (or at least 30 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude 23 states entirely. States sorted in descending order by median transfer-out rate for the subgroup.

Figure 11. Distribution of Community College Transfer Outcome Rates by State: *Hispanic Students*



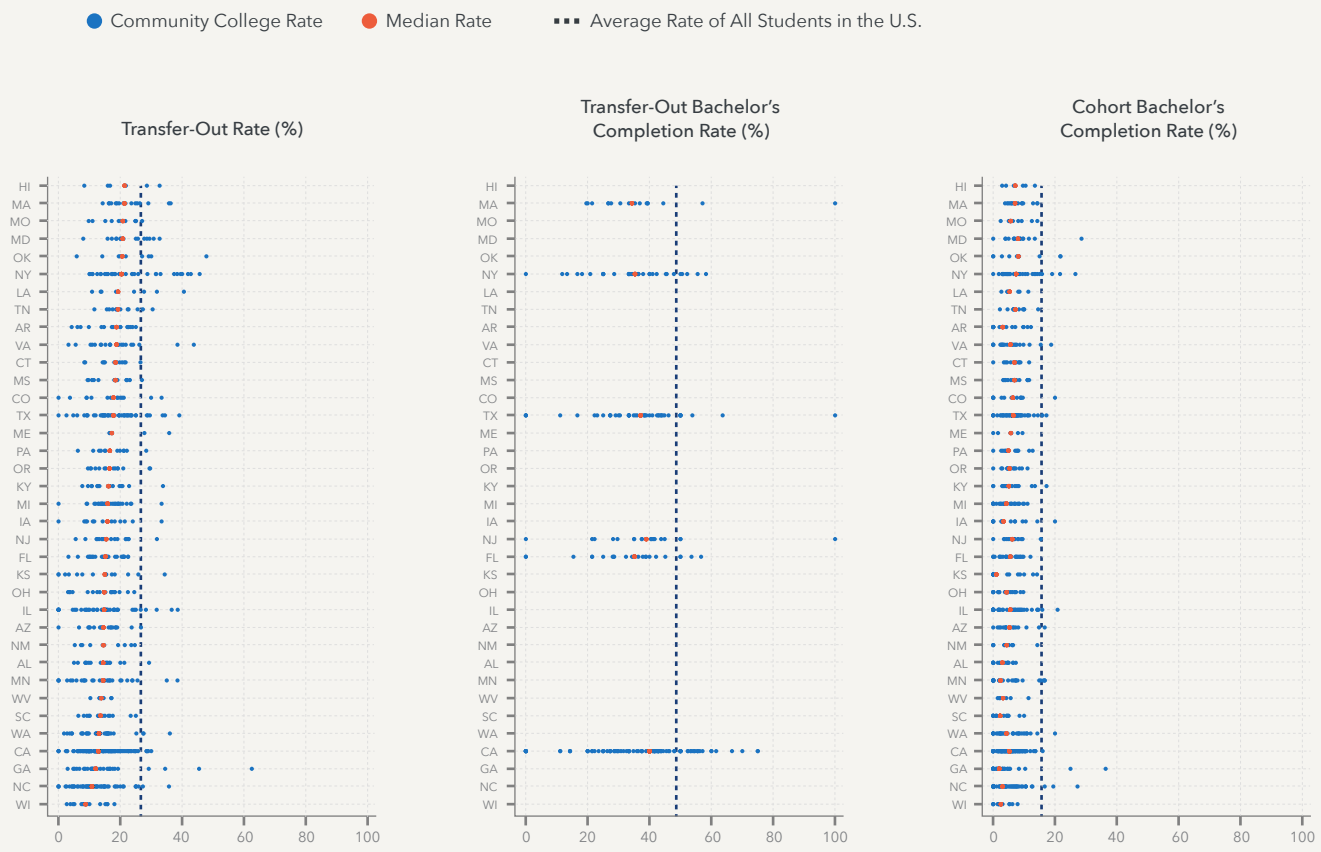
NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states with at least five community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 30 students (or at least 30 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude 21 states entirely. States sorted in descending order by median transfer-out rate for the subgroup.

Figure 12. Distribution of Community College Transfer Outcome Rates by State: *Low-Income Students*



NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states with at least five community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 30 students (or at least 30 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude 13 states entirely. States sorted in descending order by median transfer-out rate for the subgroup.

Figure 13. Distribution of Community College Transfer Outcome Rates by State: *Older Students*



NOTE: Older students are defined as 25 years old or older. Figure panels restricted to states with at least five community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 30 students (or at least 30 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude 14 states entirely. States sorted in descending order by median transfer-out rate for the subgroup.

Subgroup Variation by College and Nationally

Some community colleges have strong transfer outcomes for subgroups—relative both to all students at their college and to all students nationally.

Despite low and inequitable transfer outcomes nationally and in most states, some community colleges have strong transfer outcomes with no racial or income disparities relative to the outcomes of all students at the institution. *Figures 14* and *15* plot individual community colleges based on their fall 2015 FTIC entry cohort transfer outcomes for all students (x-axis) compared to their transfer outcomes for a particular subgroup (y-axis, with separate panels for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older students). Community colleges with no disparities in transfer outcomes for a specific subgroup fall at or above the diagonal. The vertical line represents the national transfer outcome rate for all students, such that community colleges with transfer rates above the national average appear as dots at the right of the vertical line. Hence, colleges with outcomes for a subgroup above the national average and with no disparities relative to all students at the college appear as dots in the top right segment of each figure, for which we include the percentage of colleges in each scatter plot.

Many community colleges transfer Black, Hispanic, and low-income students at the same or higher rate as all students and with rates above the national transfer-out rate, but very few colleges do so with older students. As shown in *Figure 14*, of the 847 colleges in our sample, about half have Black or Hispanic student transfer-out rates equal to or above those of all the students in their entry cohort (i.e., with no disparities), about a third of colleges have transfer-out rates for low-income students equal to or above those of all students, and few have transfer-out rates for older students equal to or above those of all students. Notably, the transfer rate gaps for Black and Hispanic students are much more disperse than for low-income students, meaning that while some colleges have no transfer-out rate disparities for Black and Hispanic students, many colleges struggle with large disparities. Importantly, 29% of colleges have transfer-out rates for their Black or Hispanic students with no disparities that are, in addition, above the national transfer-out rate, and 33% of colleges have such rates for their low-income students. Yet only 2% of colleges have transfer-out rates for their older students with no disparities that are also above the national average.

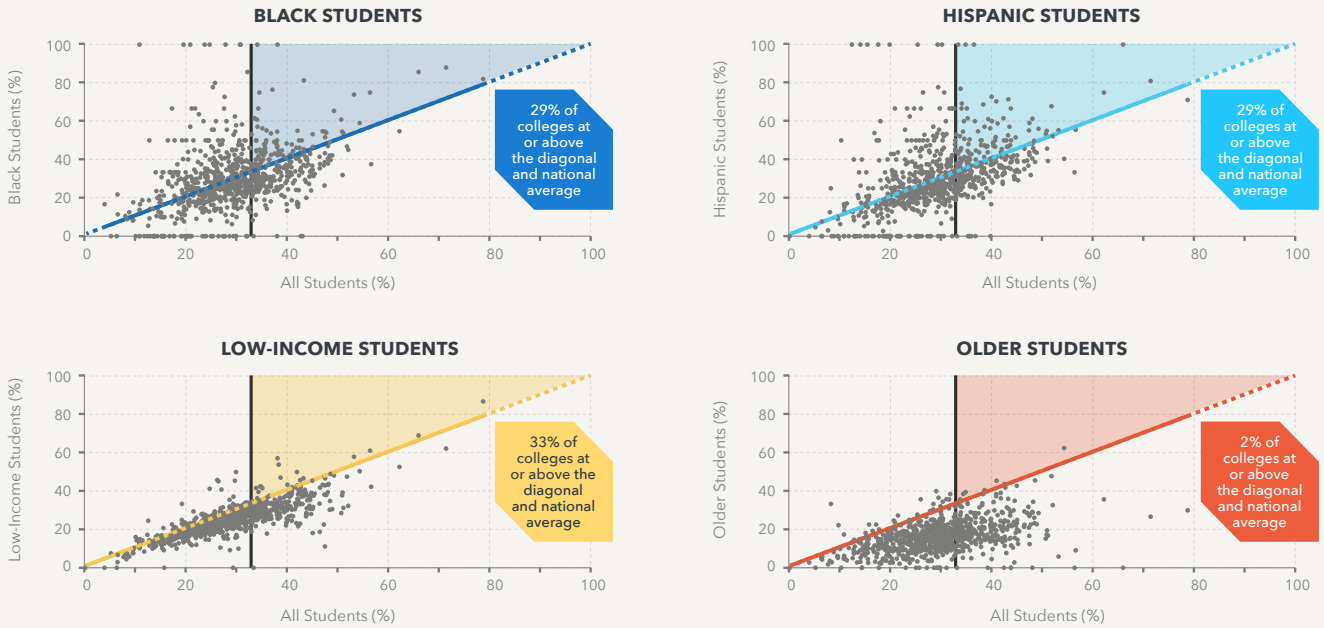
About 15% of community colleges have bachelor's completion rates for their Black, low-income, and older transfer students that are the same or higher rate as for all transfer students and that are also above the national transfer-out bachelor's completion rate for all students; for Hispanic students, this proportion is much higher, 27%. Results in *Figure 15* indicate that 14%–17% of community colleges have Black, low-income, and older transfer students who complete a bachelor's degree at the same rate or higher than that of all their transfer students and who do so above the national rate for all students. Twenty-seven percent of community colleges have transfer-out bachelor's completion rates for Hispanic students with no disparities that are above the national rate. In other words, despite disparities in transfer outcomes by race/ethnicity, income, and age

being widespread nationally, between about a sixth and a quarter of colleges have above-average bachelor's completion rates without disparities for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older transfer students. One hundred twenty-seven colleges have such rates for Black transfer students, 229 colleges for Hispanic transfer students, 119 colleges for low-income transfer students, and 145 colleges for older transfer students.

See Figures 14 and 15 on the following pages.

Figure 14. Community College Transfer Rate: *Subgroups Compared to All Students*

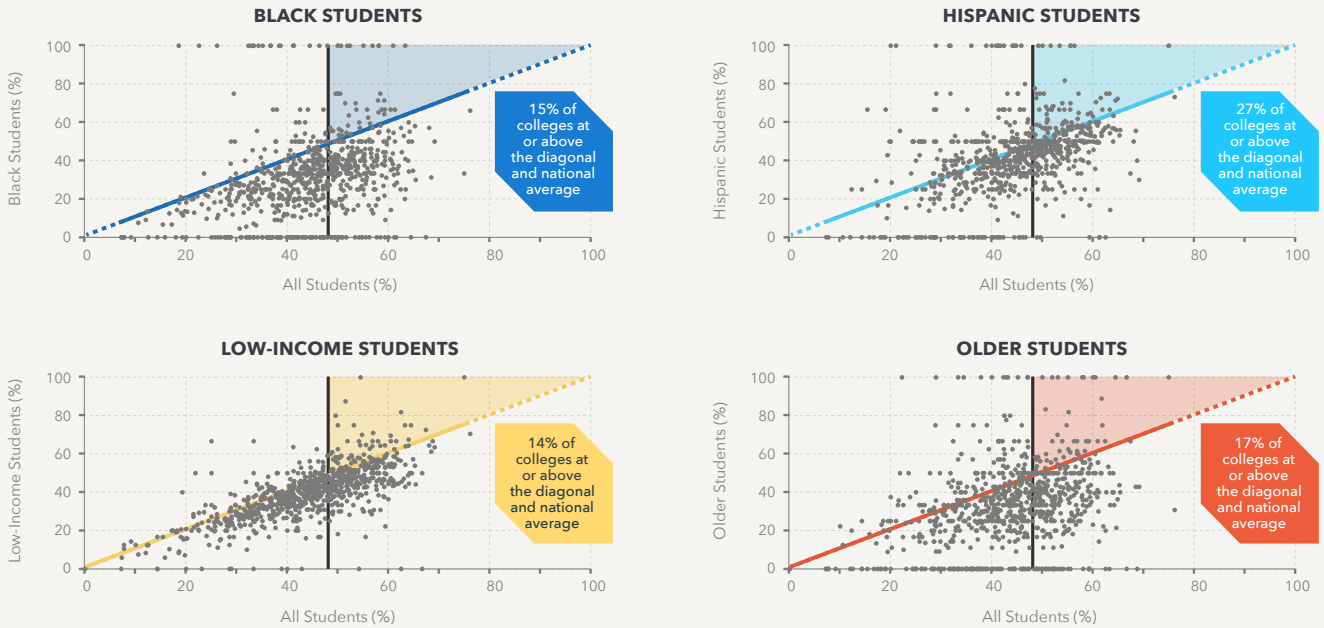
Community colleges with no disparities in transfer outcomes for a specific subgroup fall at or above the diagonal.



NOTE: Each dot represents a community college with transfer students (some dots overlap one another). The vertical line represents the national average transfer-out rate (33%). Older students are defined as 25 years or older.

Figure 15. Community College Transfer-Out Bachelor's Completion Rate: *Subgroups Compared to All Students*

Community colleges with no disparities in transfer outcomes for a specific subgroup fall at or above the diagonal.



NOTE: Each dot represents a community college with transfer students (some dots overlap one another). The vertical line represents the national average transfer-out bachelor's completion rate (48%). Older students are defined as 25 years or older.

Transfer Outcomes of Prior Dual Enrollment Students

Dual enrollment, wherein high school students enroll in college coursework before completing high school, represents a large segment of the community college population, and it is an increasingly common entry point to a transfer pathway for students seeking a bachelor's degree. Years of empirical research indicate that taking dual enrollment coursework in high school can fast-track students toward completing a college degree after high school. Yet these programs often employ policies and practices that limit access to Black, Hispanic, low-income, and other minoritized student populations (Fink & Jenkins, 2023).

Our analysis thus far has tracked 670,794 first-time-ever-in-college (FTIC) students who began higher education in a community college in the fall of 2015 and did not previously participate in dual enrollment coursework in high school. Additionally, there were 338,495 then-current high school dual enrollment students who started their dual enrollment coursework at community college in fall 2015, and there were 626,882 students who started college for the first time post-high-school at a community college in the fall of 2015 who had previously participated in dual enrollment coursework in high school.

Years of empirical research indicate that taking dual enrollment coursework in high school can fast-track students toward completing a college degree after high school. Yet these programs often employ policies and practices that limit access to Black, Hispanic, low-income, and other minoritized student populations.

In this section, we briefly highlight key takeaways from examining transfer outcomes of those students in the fall 2015 entering community college who had some prior dual enrollment (PDE) experience. We find that while PDE students have much higher transfer outcomes than FTIC students, PDE students are different demographically than community college students without PDE experience.

Outcomes of Prior Dual Enrollment Versus First-Time-Ever-in-College Students

PDE students have stronger transfer outcomes than FTIC students, nationally and in every state.

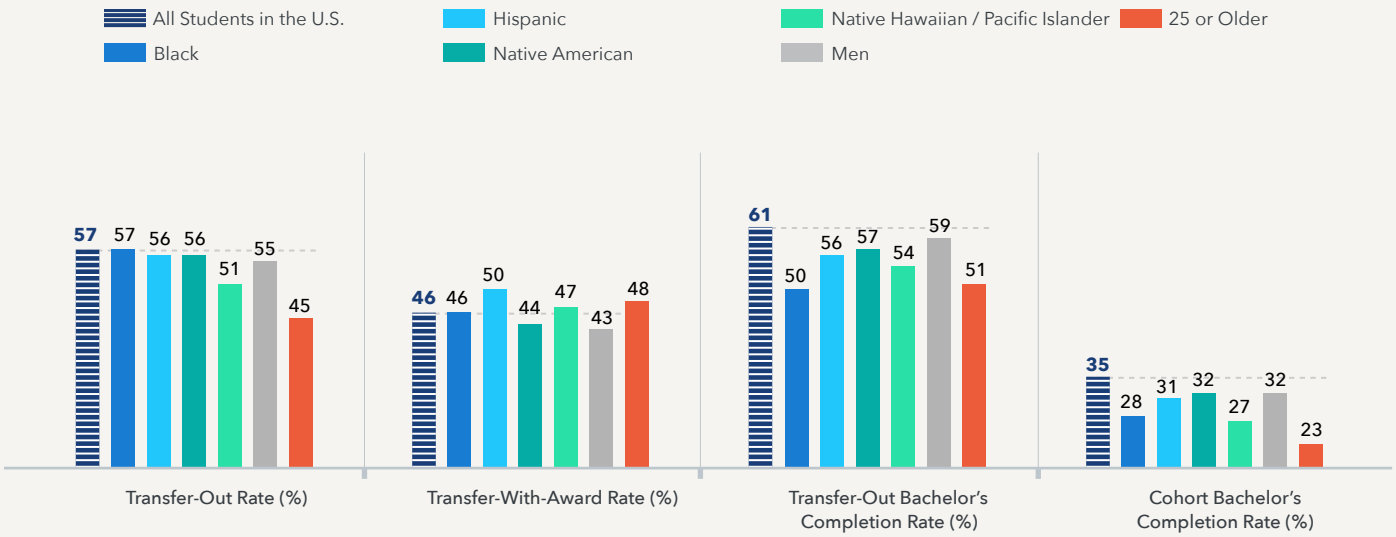
Students who enter community college with prior dual enrollment (PDE) transfer and complete bachelor's degrees at much higher rates compared to FTIC entrants, who have no PDE experience. As shown in *Figure 16*, among PDE community college entrants, the transfer-out rate is 57% (24 percentage points above that of FTIC students), and the transfer-out bachelor's completion rate is 61% (13 percentage points above that of FTIC students). Combined, this translates into a cohort bachelor's completion rate of 35% for PDE community college entrants, 19 percentage points above that of FTIC students.

The stronger performance among PDE community college students is perhaps unsurprising since the two populations—those totally new to higher education when starting at community college and those who started at community college having already taken college courses in high school—are likely quite different. For example, other research has consistently found that students who take college courses in high school are more likely to be from families with higher levels of postsecondary education (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). What is more, PDE community college entrants already have a head start on college from credits they accumulated in high school. Yet participation in dual enrollment programming is uneven by subgroups. Given the large size and stronger transfer outcomes of PDE students in the data we analyze, states and colleges should further examine their high school dual enrollment policies and ask how they can be revamped to broaden access to bachelor's degrees for populations that are disproportionately impacted by low transfer outcomes generally.

Across all states, PDE students have higher transfer-out and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates within six years than FTIC students. *Figure 17* presents average transfer outcomes among PDE students compared to those of FTIC students across states. It shows that in Texas, for example, the transfer-out rate among PDE students (66%) is nearly twice that of FTIC students (34%). In Ohio, the transfer-out rate of PDE students (59%) is more than double that of FTIC students (27%). It is worth noting, however, that while PDE students are much more likely to transfer than FTIC students across all states, they are not always more likely to transfer with a community college award. The difference in the U.S. average transfer-with-award rate between PDE and FTIC students is only 2 percentage points (46% versus 44%), and in some states, FTIC students are more likely to transfer with an award than PDE students (e.g., in Nebraska, Iowa, California, Florida, and Kansas). Finally, while we emphasize that the differences in transfer outcomes between PDE and FTIC students likely reflect unobserved student characteristics, the size of the PDE population is important to keep in mind because it represents a substantial share of new community college enrollments in most states (38% of community college starters nationally, see *Figure 1*).

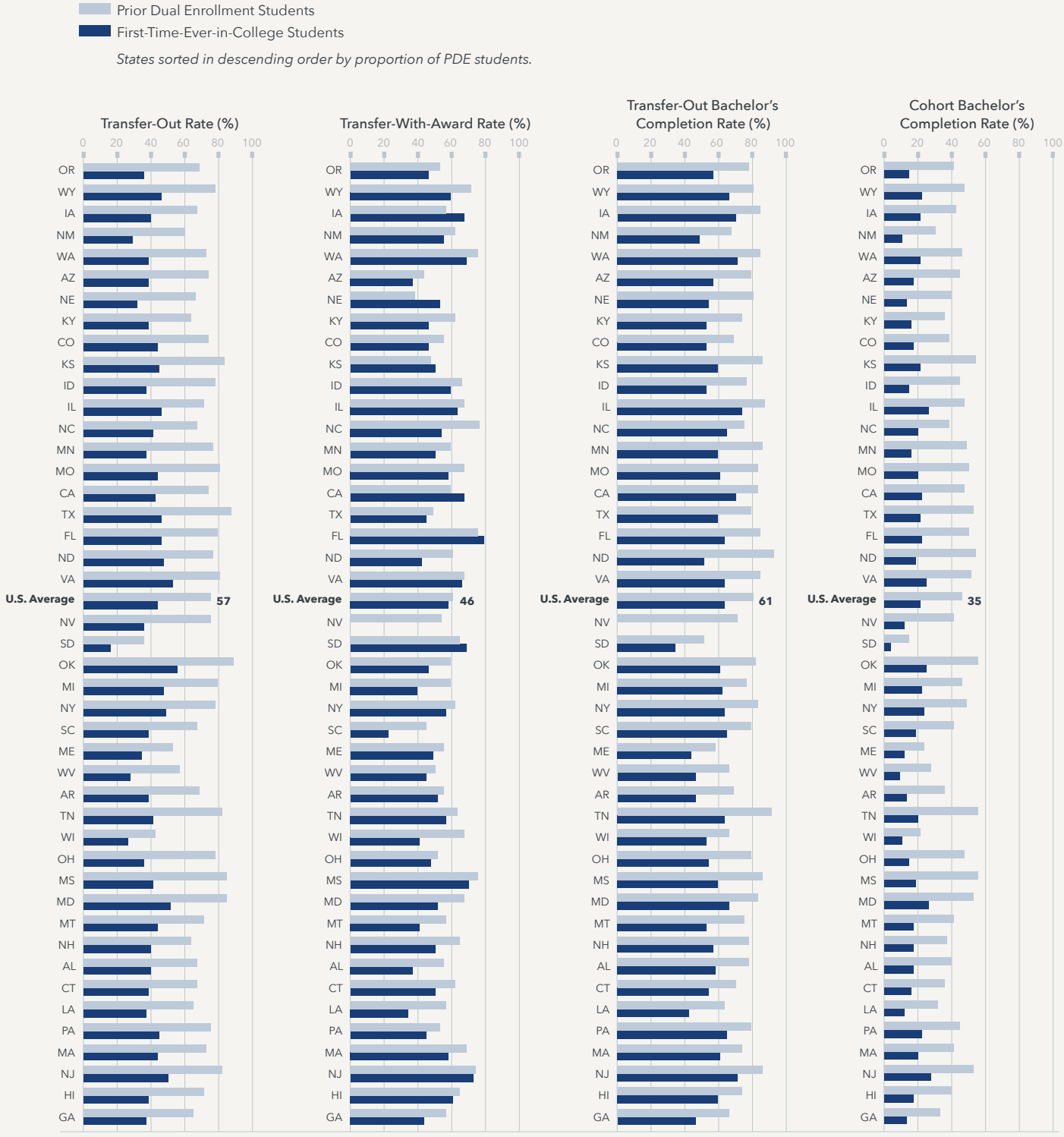
See Figures 16 and 17 on the following pages.

Figure 16. **Transfer Outcome Rates:** ***Prior Dual Enrollment Students***



NOTE: Given the large share of PDE students without neighborhood income information (48% are missing data), we do not conduct analysis on this subgroup.

Figure 17. Average Transfer Outcome Rates of PDE and FTIC Students by State



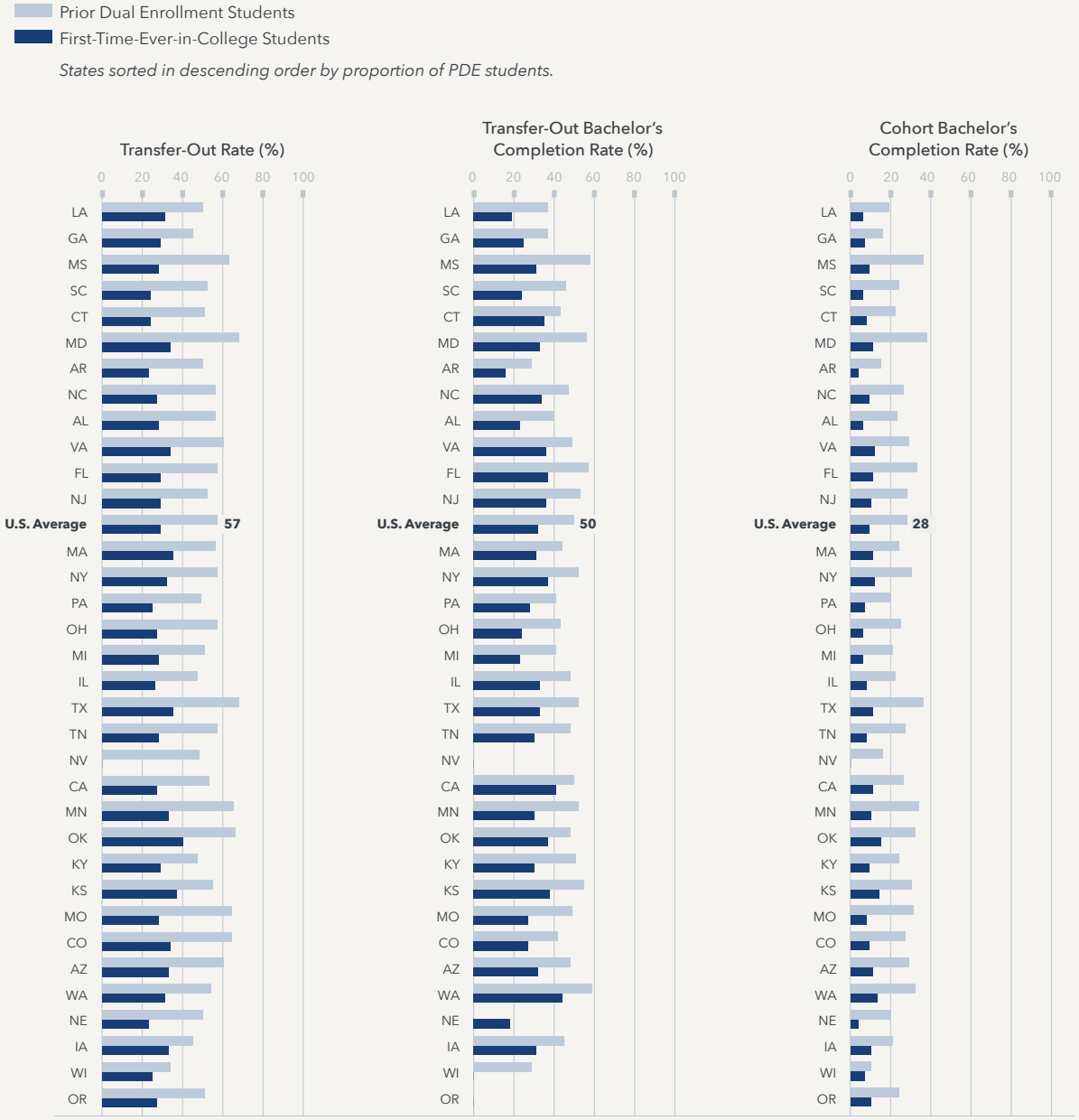
NOTE: Figure panels restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-with-award and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates). We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Indiana, Rhode Island, Utah, and Vermont entirely.

Outcomes Among Prior Dual Enrollment Student Subgroups

Black and Hispanic PDE students have stronger transfer outcomes than Black and Hispanic FTIC students.

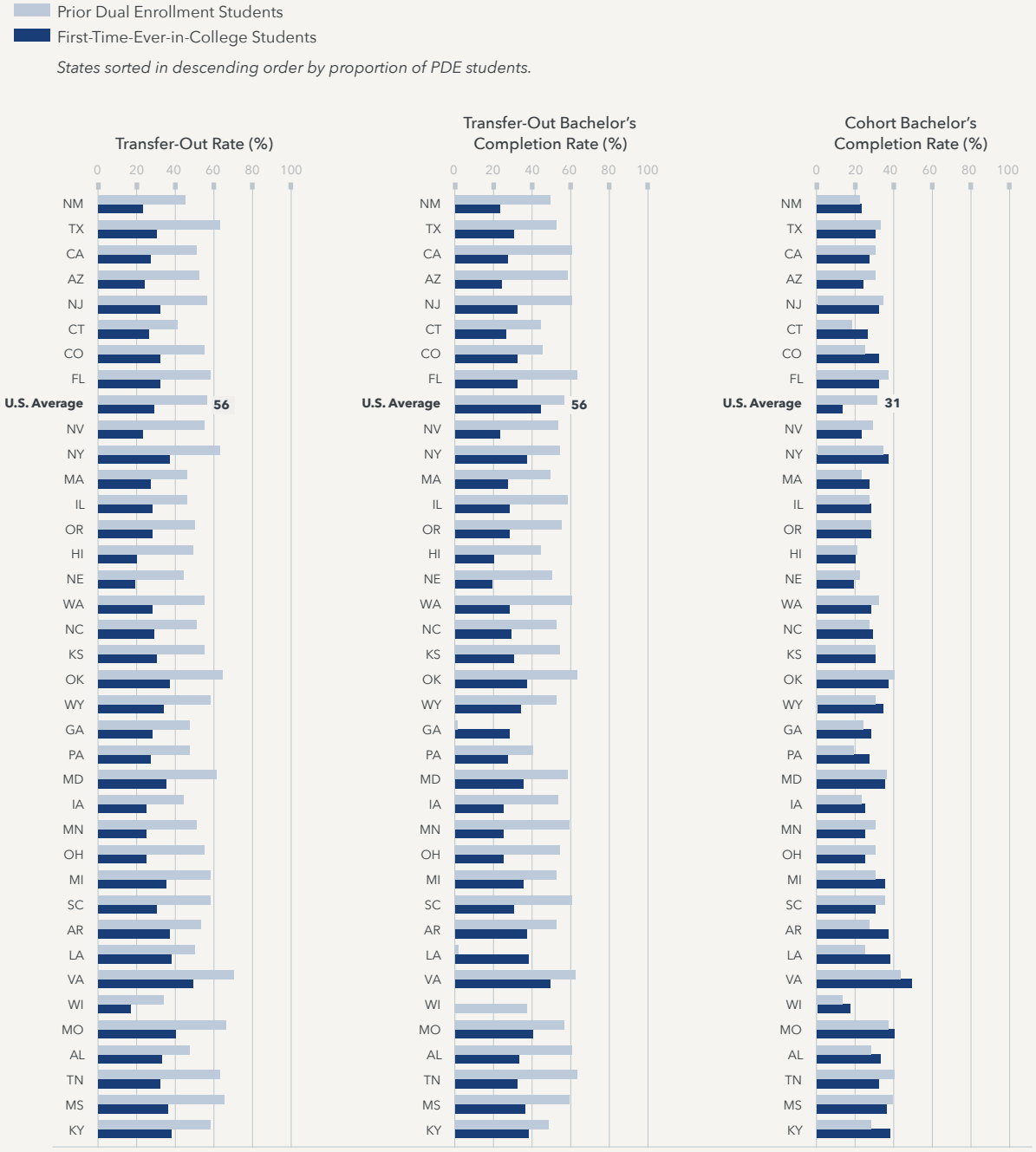
Consistent with the general finding that PDE student transfer outcomes are stronger than FTIC student transfer outcomes, it is also the case that Black and Hispanic PDE students transfer and complete bachelor's degrees at much higher rates than FTIC students from the same subgroups (*Figures 18* and *19*). The differences in transfer-out rates are greater than 30 percentage points for Black PDE students in states such as Mississippi (63% for PDE students versus 28% for FTIC students) and Maryland (68% for PDE students versus 34% FTIC students) and for Hispanic PDE students in states such as Texas (63% for PDE students versus 30% for FTIC students). And Black and Hispanic PDE transfer students complete bachelor's degrees at higher rates than FTIC transfer students from the same subgroups across states. *Figure 18* shows transfer outcomes for Black PDE students compared with those of Black FTIC students. The results are similar to those for Hispanic students (*Figure 19*); they demonstrate how the stronger transfer outcomes of PDE students over FTIC students persist among subgroups and across states. But it is important to recognize that Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented among PDE students (which we examine in the next subsection). *See Figures 18 and 19 on the following pages.*

Figure 18. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates of PDE Students by State:** ***Black Students***



NOTE: Figure restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least 10 students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude the states of Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming entirely.

Figure 19. **Average Transfer Outcome Rates of PDE Students by State:** ***Hispanic Students***



NOTE: Figure restricted to states that, in the 2015 cohort, have at least three community colleges, each of which enrolls at least ten students (or at least 10 transfer students in the case of transfer-out bachelor's completion rate) in the subgroup. We thus exclude the states of Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming entirely.

Underrepresentation Among Prior Dual Enrollment Students

Black, Hispanic, and male community college entrants are underrepresented among those with prior dual enrollment experience.

Consistent with other research documenting racial and gender gaps in dual enrollment participation and other advanced high school coursework,[8] Black, Hispanic, and male students are underrepresented among community college students entering with prior dual enrollment from high school. As shown in *Table 3*, while Black students make up 14% of FTIC students in the fall 2015 entry cohort, they make up only 7% of PDE students in the cohort. Similarly, Hispanic students make up 24% of FTIC students but only 19% of PDE students. Men are also underrepresented: They comprise 46% of FTIC students but just 38% of PDE students. *See Table 3 on the next page.*

Our analysis of the transfer outcomes of community college entrants with and without PDE experience highlights the potential of high school dual enrollment to increase equity in transfer outcomes. Students from all subgroups who participated in PDE show stronger transfer outcomes, yet further efforts are needed to equalize representation in dual enrollment for Black, Hispanic, and other underserved high school students in order to fully realize the potential of dual enrollment to advance equitable transfer outcomes.

Table 3. **FTIC and PDE Students:** ***Distribution by Student Characteristics***

Characteristic	Fall 2015 Community College Entry Cohort	
	FTIC Students (*n* = 670,794)	**PDE Students** (*n* = 626,882)
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	**5%**	**4%**
Black	**14%**	**7%**
Hispanic	**24%**	**19%**
International student	**1%**	**0.5%**
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	**0.4%**	**0.9%**
Native American	**0.8%**	**0.3%**
Two or more races	**4%**	**4%**
White	**43%**	**57%**
Missing	**8%**	**2%**
Gender		
Female	**49%**	**60%**
Male	**46%**	**38%**
Missing	**4%**	**2%**
Student Neighborhood Income		
Low	**36%**	**20%**
Middle	**21%**	**13%**
High	**32%**	**19%**
Missing	**12%**	**48%**
Age in Years		
17 or younger	**0.1%**	**6%**
18–19	**64%**	**35%**
20–24	**23%**	**45%**
25 or older	**12%**	**14%**

NOTE: Some percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this report, we have used national data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to track the transfer outcomes of students who started college at a community college and to report disaggregated metrics for students from historically underserved racial, income, and age groups. Our findings indicate that students nationwide are transferring to four-year institutions at low rates, which have not improved much over the past decade. Furthermore, there are large inequities in transfer outcomes for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older students, who tend to have lower transfer-out and transfer bachelor's completion rates compared to other students in their same state or college.

Community college transfer pathways are ineffective, inequitable, and not improving fast enough.

However, this is not the case at all colleges. We find large differences in transfer outcomes across individual community colleges, with, for example, about one in six community colleges having achieved an above-the-national-average transfer-out bachelor's completion rate for Black students, with no disparity gap relative to the rate for all students at the college. Finally, we find that prior dual enrollment participation is highly correlated with positive transfer outcomes among all students and among Black and Hispanic students in particular. However, we find that Black and Hispanic students participate in dual enrollment at much lower rates than other students. In what follows, we discuss key implications from our findings for community colleges and policymakers, and we point at critical areas for further research. We conclude the report with some final reflections.

Implications for Community College Leaders and State Policymakers

Transfer is a particularly important means for increasing attainment of bachelor's degrees, especially for students from historically underserved groups enrolled in large numbers at community colleges. But the capacity to expand access and success in transfer and bachelor's degree completion for students depends largely on the ability of institutions and states to plan and implement evidence-based improvements in practice. Below, we list a few ways in which community college leaders and policymakers can use the data and findings in this report to guide internal conversations and decision-making about transfer practices.

1 College and state leaders should regularly monitor their transfer performance—both in having their students transfer to four-year institutions and in having them complete bachelor's degrees—making sure to disaggregate outcomes by race/ethnicity, income, gender, age, and other high-priority characteristics.

College, state, and system leaders can use data sources like NSC to measure how many of their students transfer to a four-year institution, how many go on to complete a bachelor's degree, and in what fields. Detailed instructions for replicating the metrics employed in this report using NSC data are available (see Fink & Jenkins, 2017), and community colleges can also view selected institutional results directly from NSC via its StudentTracker Premium Service or Postsecondary Data Partnership dashboards. Disaggregating data by student characteristics can help institutions improve their transfer outcomes by directing their efforts more effectively toward the subgroups of students struggling the most to transfer and to complete a bachelor's degree. In addition to NSC data, institutions should also make use of other data on transfer outcomes. For example, the Department of Education recently released data on transfer metrics for community colleges and four-year institutions based on federal data from financial aid recipients (Sotherland et al., 2023).

Community colleges and states should further explore and expand the potential of dual enrollment to equitably increase transfer outcomes.

2 Community colleges should benchmark their outcomes to those of other institutions nationally and in their state, with emphasis on differences in outcomes of the racial/ethnic, income, gender, age, and other priority subgroups they serve.

Institutions can use their own transfer metrics and compare them to the national and state-by-state metrics for all students and for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older adults shown in this report as a means to benchmark their transfer performance for all their students and for the different student populations they serve. Comparisons with the transfer outcomes of other institutions within their state are particularly helpful, as

these institutions operate in similar policy environments and hence can offer a more contextually meaningful metric of gaps in performance. Moreover, institutions can use the metrics in this report to assess where they stand in terms of transfer equity. For example, they can compare their transfer outcome equity gaps with those of all institutions nationwide (see *Figures 14 and 15*).

3 State policymakers should use the results in this report to identify critical areas to equitably improve the transfer outcomes in their state.

One of the most striking findings in this report is the lack of improvement in transfer-out rates nationwide, with state systems on average having marginal increases, stagnation, or even losses in their transfer rates. State policymakers can use the metrics in this report to identify the groups of students in their state with the lowest transfer rates and develop strategies to help improve transfer success for students from underserved groups. States should do so by having bachelor's completion after transfer in mind, such that improvements reflect not only in transfer-out rates but also in bachelor's completion rates among all community college students. In doing so, states have a chance to improve their overall transfer metrics while increasing transfer equity.

4 Community colleges and states should further explore and expand the potential of dual enrollment to equitably increase transfer outcomes.

This report documents how students with prior dual enrollment experience transfer to four-year institutions at much higher rates than first-time-ever-in-college students and are more likely to complete bachelor's degrees. Moreover, it shows that higher transfer outcomes among PDE students are also achieved by those PDE students in underserved subgroups, who are less likely to participate in dual enrollment. For example, Black PDE students have a transfer-out bachelor's completion rate that is 18 percentage points higher than that of Black FTIC students. While students with prior dual enrollment experience tend to be different from the rest of students and tend to come from more privileged backgrounds (Shivji & Wilson, 2019), the differences in transfer outcomes found in this analysis between PDE students and FTIC students are striking, particularly within Black and Hispanic subgroups. These findings should compel college leaders and state policymakers to further examine their dual enrollment policies and practices and find ways to effectively expand the benefits of dual enrollment to additional students, particularly those from historically underserved groups. By expanding the benefits of dual enrollment, community colleges and states can open an on-ramp for stronger and more equitable transfer outcomes and overall bachelor's completion rates among their community college students.

Areas for Further Research

The descriptive findings in this report raise numerous questions around transfer equity at community colleges that should be subject to further research. We highlight some of the most critical questions below.

1 What explains the lack of improvement in recent years in the national transfer-out rate, and what can policymakers and colleges do to change this trend?

Between 2007 and 2015, there were gains in the national transfer-with-award and transfer-out bachelor's completion rates, but there was little improvement in the transfer-out rate for FTIC community college students. It could be that the broad economic recovery in the mid-2010s and the tight labor market discouraged students from pursuing a bachelor's degree. Or it could be that barriers in the transfer process—such as laissez-faire recruitment and support from four-year partners or unclear transfer pathways into bachelor's degree programs—continued to stifle aspiring transfer students. Overall, the field needs further evidence that sheds light on these and other potential reasons transfer rates have stagnated and that informs ideas on how to improve them moving forward.

2 What community college practices and strategies, in collaboration with four-year transfer partners, explain why some colleges have much stronger transfer outcomes than others for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students?

This report documents the inequities in transfer outcomes nationally and across states for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and older students, but some community colleges were clear outliers in their strong performance for Black, Hispanic, and low-income transfer students. There are not clear differences in transfer outcomes between community colleges with primarily academic versus occupational program mixes or among those located in urban, suburban, or rural settings. The large institutional variation nationally and within states in community college transfer outcomes thus suggests that local institutional practices and policies are important factors in generating stronger or weaker transfer outcomes. Further research is needed to identify and document useful institutional practices at colleges with exemplary transfer outcomes for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and other underserved populations.

3 What are the economic returns to transferring to a four-year institution and completing a bachelor's degree, and are they the same for all students?

As a more accessible and affordable route to a bachelor's degree, community college transfer has great potential to expand economic opportunity. If starting at a community college helps students complete a bachelor's degree at a relatively lower cost, it should increase the return to higher education for individuals. However, if students lose many credits through the transfer process or if they encounter barriers that stifle their progress toward completion, the economic gains from using transfer pathways may not be realized. Further research could apply an economic lens to examine the extent to which transferring actually pays off for students—and whether Black, Hispanic, low-income, and other student populations with much to gain are indeed full beneficiaries of transfer pathways.

Final Thoughts

Community college transfer is important because of its potential to increase bachelor's degree attainment for students and communities who have not had accessible or affordable pathways to a bachelor's degree. This report has detailed how current community college transfer pathways are ineffective, inequitable, and not improving fast enough. On an optimistic note, we find clear examples of community colleges with exemplary outcomes, and we illustrate the potential to better leverage dual enrollment as an equitable on-ramp to transfer pathways. While this report has focused on community college institutional performance, transfer student success also relies on strong four-year institutional partners. Thus, in a companion report, we examine measures of four-year institutional performance. We encourage readers to explore the report, *Tracking Transfer: Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment*, which provides disaggregated data on community college transfer students after transferring into four-year institutions, with detailed breakdowns by institutional sector and state.

Endnotes

[1] We build on the transfer metrics developed by Jenkins and Fink (2016).

[2] For NSC coverage rate estimates, see NSCRC (n.d.).

[3] Our definitions of current and prior dual enrollment students are from those used by NSCRC.

[4] These are from the original Tracking Transfer report (Jenkins & Fink, 2016) and from subsequent NSC reports. NSC has continued to update national results on the community college transfer outcomes (see NSCRC, 2022).

[5] We follow categories and definitions found in Jenkins and Fink (2016).

[6] We again follow the approach from Jenkins and Fink (2016).

[7] Among students in our sample, fewer than a half percent of non-transfer students completed a bachelor's degree at a two-year institution within six years.

[8] For a review, see Fink and Jenkins (2023).

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