

Sequences to Success in WA State WERA Webinar Series



MAY 2026

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

 **WASHINGTON STUDENT
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Did Anyone Else Get Sold This Narrative?



High School

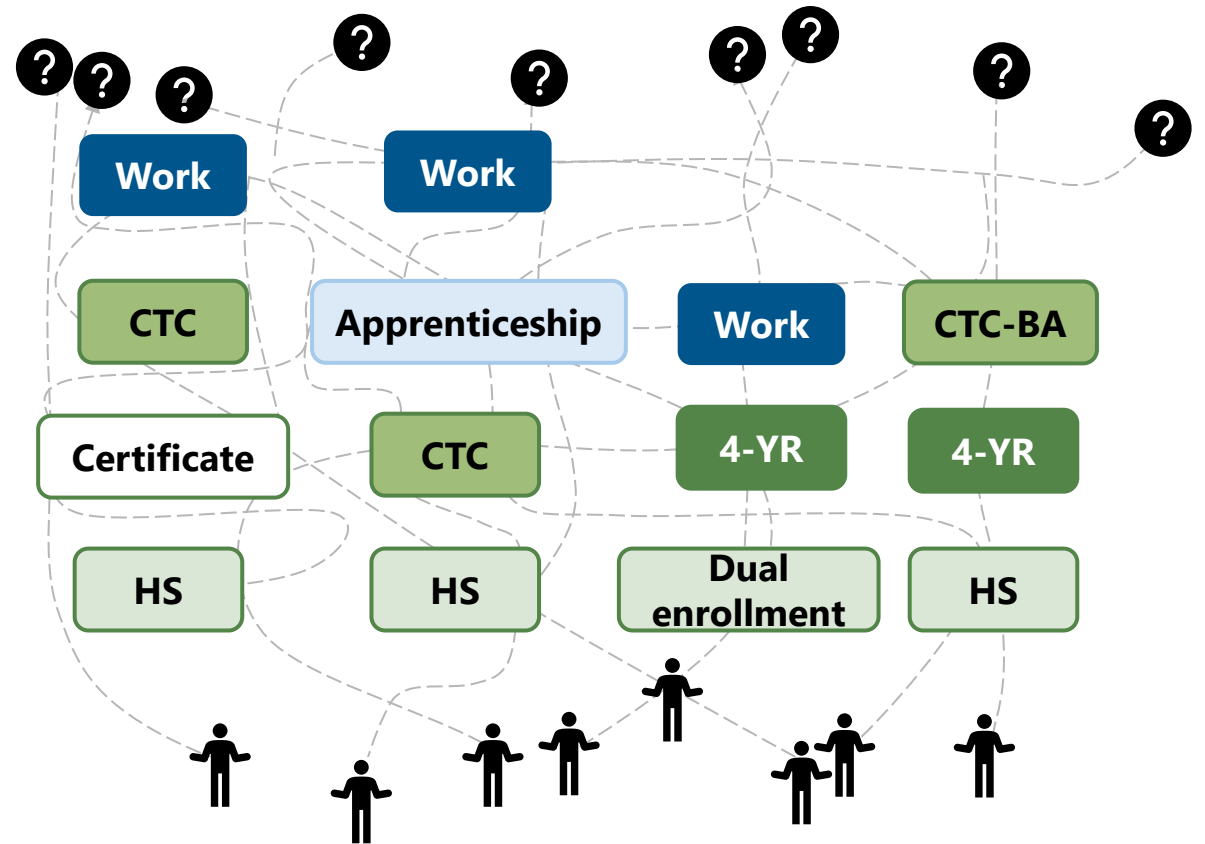


College



Career

Today's young adults face an increasingly complex array of pathways after high school.



***MDRC* engaged with *WSAC* and *ERDC* to explore key questions about school-to-work transitions in WA state.**

- What are the **most common postsecondary pathways** taken by young adults after graduating from high school?
- What are the **labor market outcomes** (e.g., annual earnings, percent stably employed) for each of these pathways?
- How do former Washington state high school **students describe their experiences** navigating postsecondary education and training?

MDRC and WSAC used *state longitudinal data* from the WA State Education Research and Data Center and *Sequence Analysis* to identify and unpack common school-to-work pathways.

- Cohort: ~**64,000 high school seniors** in 2017 graduating class
- From July 2017 – December 2023, we code each student’s “**state**” in each quarter to build a dataset of individual **trajectories**.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	...	Q27	Q28
Student X							
Student Y							
Student Z							
etc.							

- Similar trajectories are clustered into **pathways**.



We pair
quantitative analysis
with interviews to
add nuance and
deepen
understanding.

- **Eligible population:** People who graduated from WA high schools between **2011** and **2023**
- **Objective:** Explore the factors, experiences, and challenges influencing students' transitions from high school to postsecondary education and employment
- **Topics:** Postsecondary education/ training, dual enrollment, nondegree enrollments, supports available/needed, key turning points
- **Format:** Semi-structured interviews, virtual

Key Takeaways

1. The research team surfaced **12 key pathways** that define the postsecondary experiences of WA students during the 6.5 years following high school graduation. The HS -> Bachelor's in 4 Years -> Career path is no longer the "normative" route.
2. To increase credential attainment, WA can focus attention on the nearly **30% of students in Pathway 2: Some College, No Credential**, who enroll in postsecondary education but stop out before earning a credential, during the 6.5 years following high school graduation.
3. Non-degree **certificate pathways are associated with relatively high rates of employment and earnings** and may be viable options for students who need a shorter postsecondary option.
4. For some students, college is just **expected**, while other students must contend with a **variety of factors when making post-HS plans**.
5. Students were more likely to highlight **informal** (vs formal) **sources** such as their own resilience or advice from trusted adults when reflecting on **support during their postsecondary journeys**.

A Few Reminders

- ❖ This project is meant to be descriptive and exploratory. **We are not making any causal claims.** Rather, we are attempting to map out the postsecondary landscape in WA and provide a springboard for more rigorous research on key topics that surface.
- ❖ We believe that **there are a variety of successful pathways,** and that each student has a unique set of strengths and needs. We are not prescribing any one pathway as best for everyone.
- ❖ **The findings are preliminary.** We are in the midst of fact checking.

Disclaimer

The research presented here uses confidential data from the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) located within the Washington Office of Financial Management (OFM). ERDC's data system is a statewide longitudinal data system that includes de-identified data about people's preschool, educational, and workforce experiences. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of OFM or other data contributors. Any errors are attributable to the authors.

QUESTIONS?

THE 12 PATHWAYS

No College Enrollment (20%, ~12.8K students)

1



Some College, No Credential (29%, ~19.5K students)

2



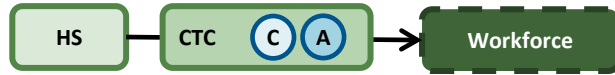
Certificate (2%, ~1.1K students)

3



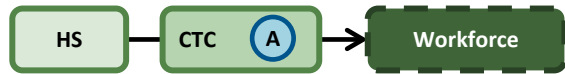
Stacked Certificate & Associate's Degree (1%, ~900 students)

4



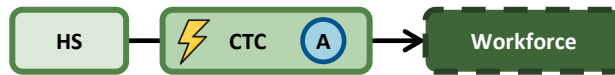
Associate's Degree (4%, ~2.8K students)

5



Dual Credit to Associate's Degree (1%, ~700 students)

6



Associate's Degree with Later Completion (3%, ~1.8K students)

7



Bachelor's Degree (19%, ~12.3K students)

8



Dual Credit to Bachelor's Degree (4%, ~2.7K students)

9



Bachelor's Degree with Later Completion (10%, ~6.5K students)

10



CTC-to-Four-Year Transfer (5%, ~3.2K students)

11



Other College Enrollment Patterns (1%, ~500 students)

12



HS Student graduates from high school

CTC Student enrolls at a community or technical college

4-YR Student enrolls at a four-year college or university

Workforce Student presumed to be in the workforce

----- Indicates that only some students engage in the activity /earn credential.

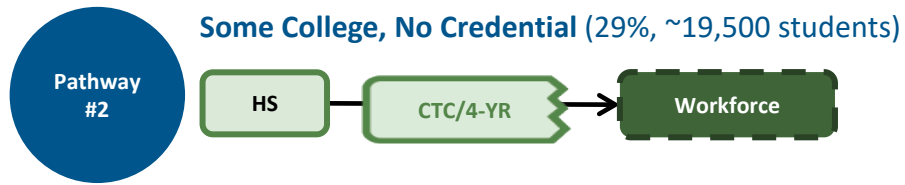
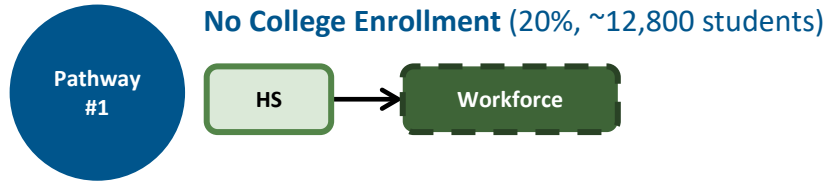
(C) Certificate

(A) Associate's degree

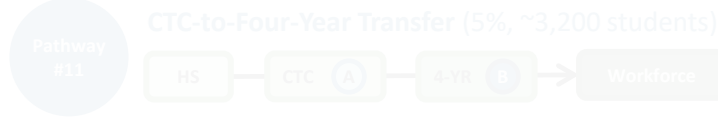
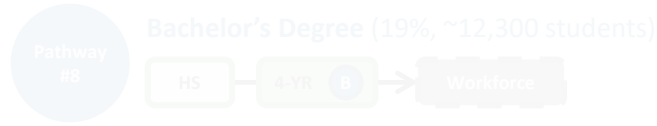
(B) Bachelor's degree

⚡ Student uses dual credit to earn credential fast

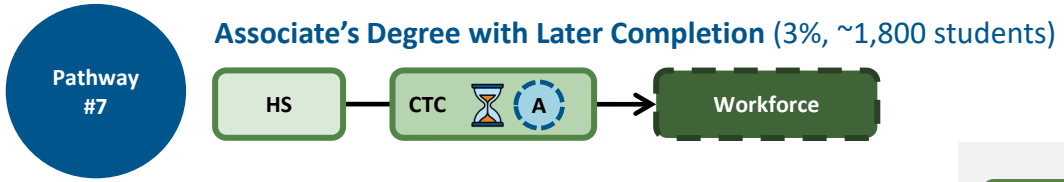
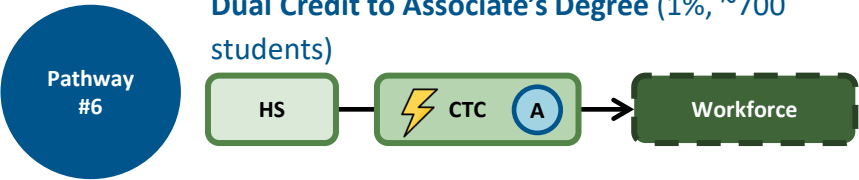
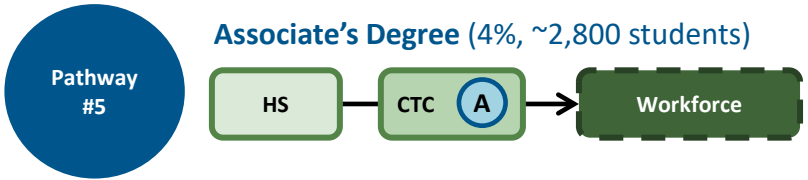
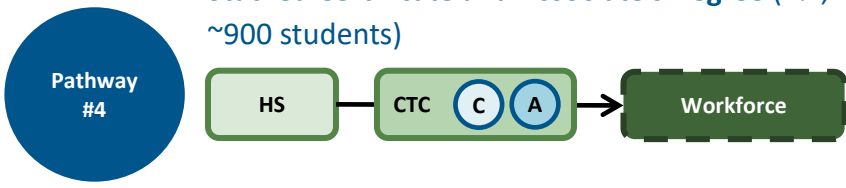
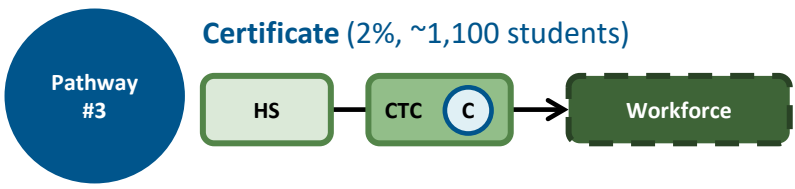
🕒 Student completes a credential later in the observation window



Two largest pathways, include students who do not earn credential within 6.5 years following high school graduation. Pathway 2: Some College, No Credential especially important to study given that some students in this pathway enroll for several terms.



- HS** Student graduates from high school
- CTC** Student enrolls at a community or technical college
- 4-YR** Student enrolls at a four-year college or university
- Workforce** Student presumed to be in the workforce
- C** Student earns certificate
- A** Student earns associate's degree
- B** Student earns bachelor's degree
- ⚡** Student uses dual credit to earn credential fast
- 🕒** Student completes a credential later in the observation window
- Indicate that only some students engage in the activity /earn credential.

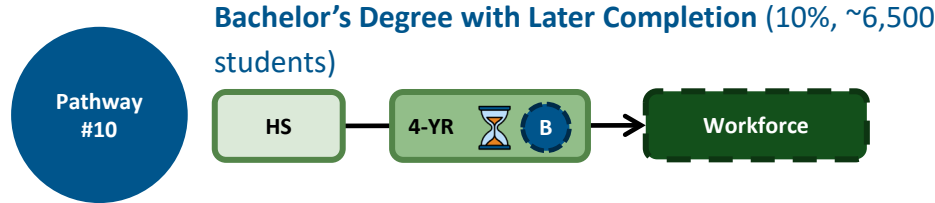
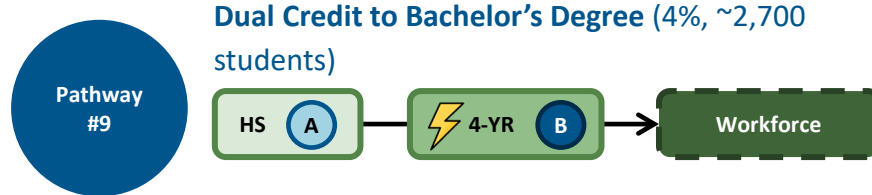
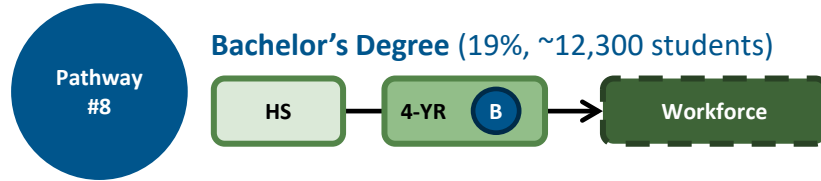


Five pathways in the community and technical college space. Nationally, more students are enrolling community colleges. Important to surface their unique needs and track their outcomes.



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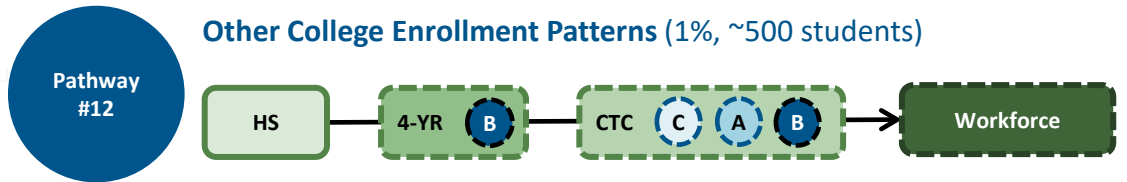
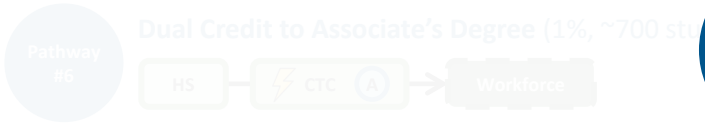
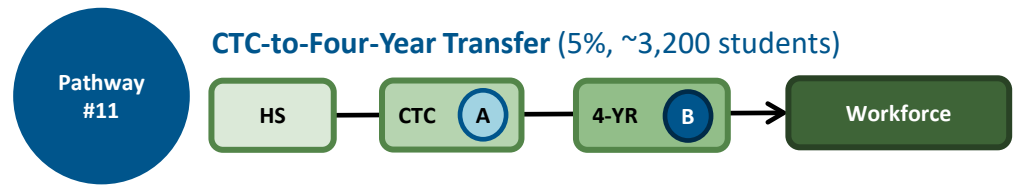
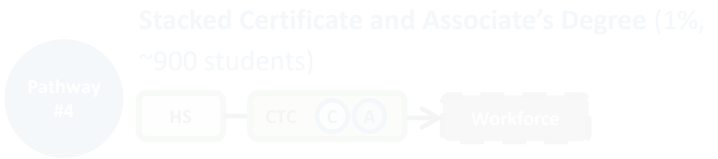
Three pathways for four-year colleges and universities. The “traditional” pathway is the third largest. But diversity of pathways even in the normative institution.



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- ⚡** Student uses dual credit to earn credential fast
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- Indicate that only some students engage in the activity /earn credential.



Finally, there are two pathways that include a mix of CTC and four-year enrollments.



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- 4-YR** Student enrolls at a four-year college or university
- Workforce** Student presumed to be in the workforce
- C** Student earns certificate
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- Indicate that only some students engage in the activity /earn credential.

TAKEAWAY 1:

Students are taking a variety of routes through postsecondary education and into the workforce

TAKEAWAY 2:

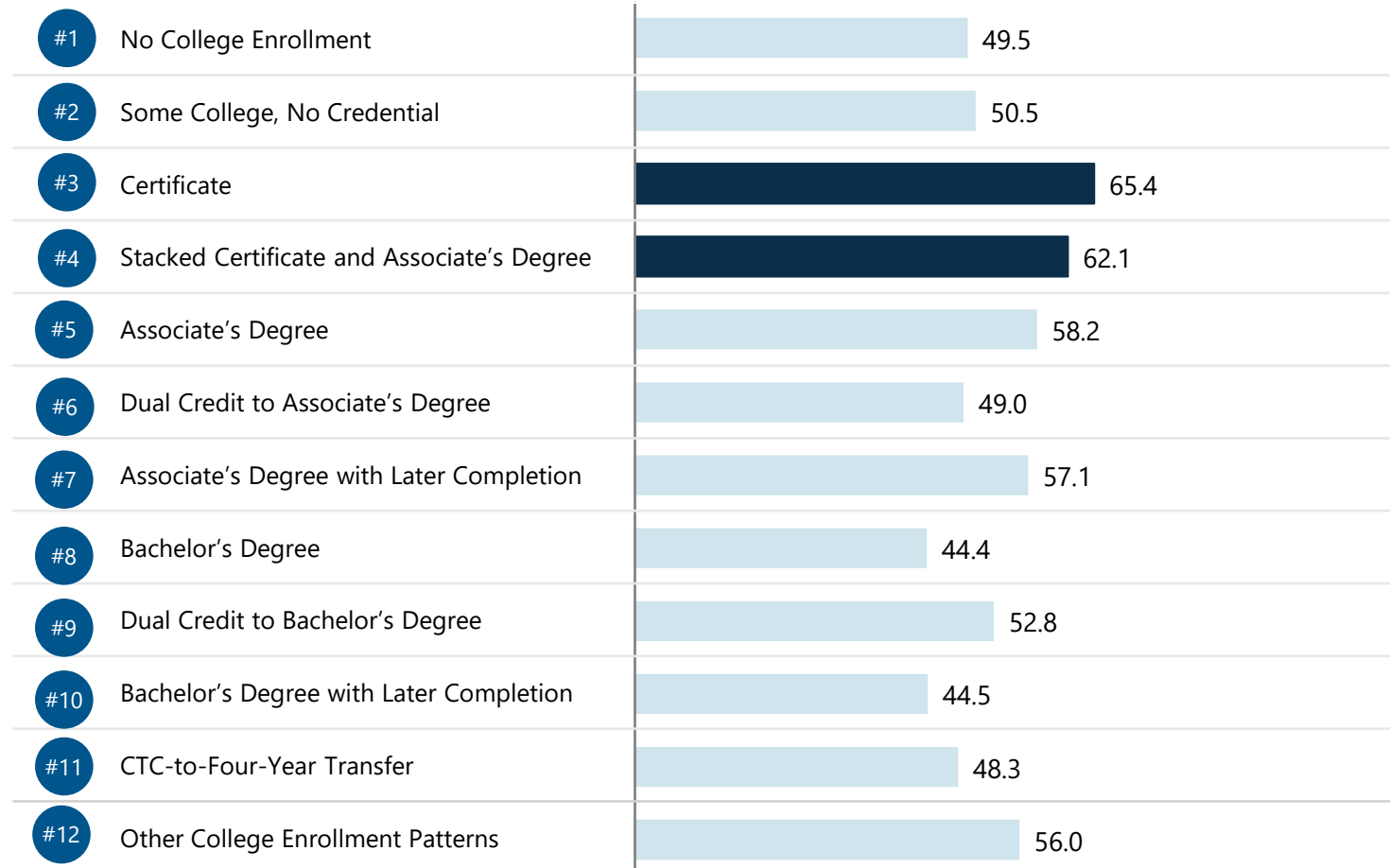
To make progress towards its 70% credential attainment goal, WA can focus attention on the 30% of students in Pathway 2: Some College, No Credential.

QUESTIONS?

LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES

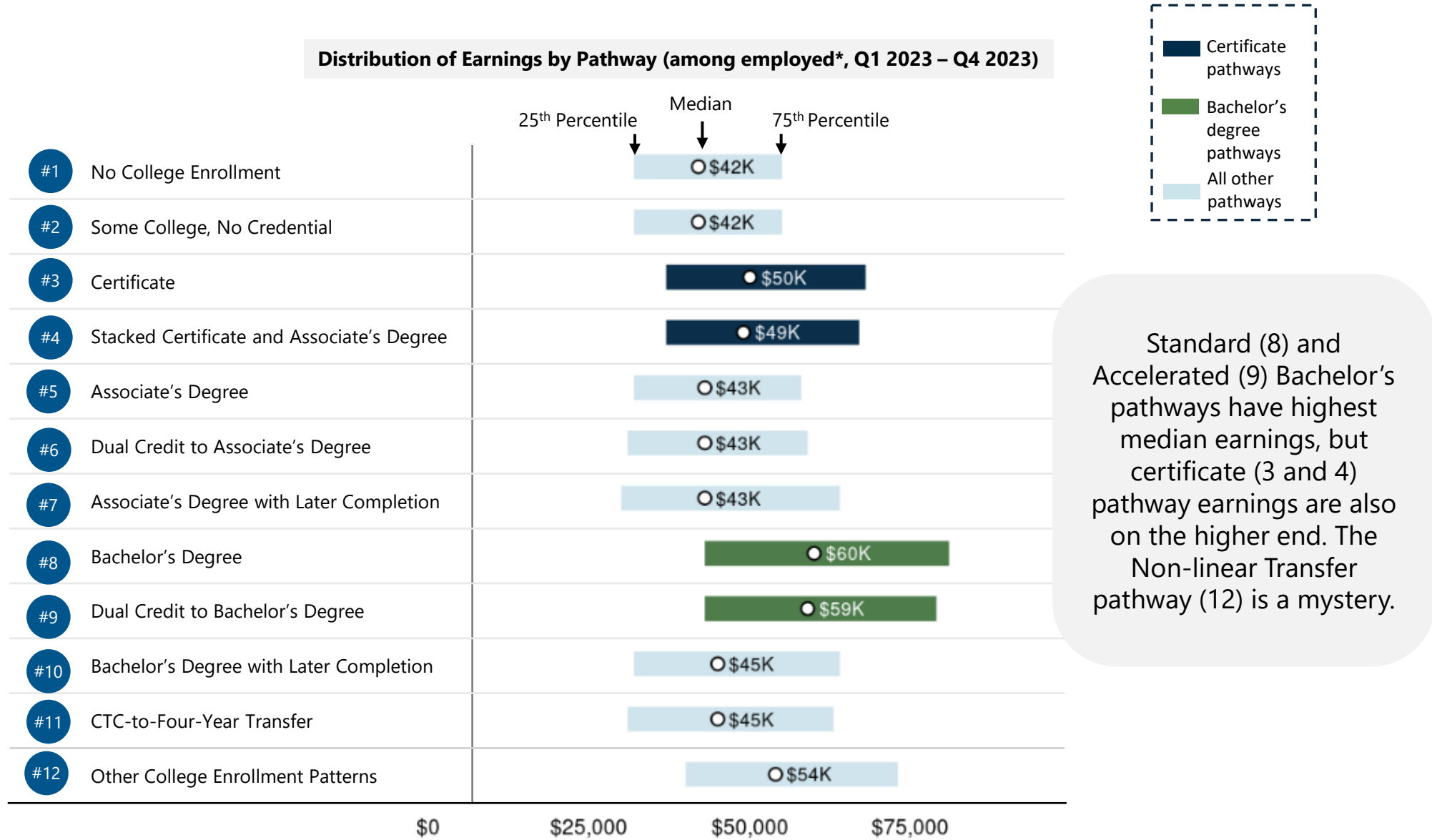
Certificate pathways have highest rates of qualified employment

Percent with Qualified Employment (employed Q1 – Q4, earnings over \$14K) in 2023



Remember, UI data only includes in-state employment at certain jobs. Some pathways (e.g., Bachelor's/4-YR) have higher percentages of students who leave state for school, and some of them do not return. This artificially lowers the employment rates for these pathways.

There is a wide range in earnings for all pathways



TAKEAWAY 3:

Relative to other CTC pathways, non-degree certificate pathways have stronger short-term labor market outcomes and may be a viable alternative for students facing barriers to completion of longer credential programs.

QUESTIONS?

INTERVIEWS

Interviewee Pathways



No College Enrollment (20%, ~12,800 students)



- HS → Work → Upward Mobility (1)
- HS → Informal Work for Family + Saving for College (1)



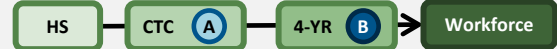
Bachelor's Degree (19%, ~12,300 students)



- HS → 4-YR (BA/BS pursuing as of time of interview) (2)
- HS → 4-YR (B) → Work → Professional Advancement (3)
- HS → 4-YR (B) → Work (2)
- HS → 4-YR (B) → Work → MBA (1)
- HS → 4-YR (B) → Work → Unemployment (1)



CTC-to-Four-Year Transfer (5%, ~3,200 students)



- HS → CTC(A) → 4-YR(B) → Work (1)



Other College Enrollment Patterns (1%, ~500 students)



- HS → Incomplete 4-YR → CTC → 4-YR (1)

Reflections on First Step after High School

- Eight people expressed that college was expected, either by family, school, or social environment.

Yeah, [college] wasn't a choice in my household... My entire family's from the East Coast, and over there, it's a different environment. It's not, are you going to school, it's *where* are you going to school?

- The other five people made practical or exploratory choices based on financial need, personal interests, or uncertainty about college.



TAKEAWAY 4:

For some interviewees, college was just expected, while for others, a variety of exploratory and practical factors influenced their decisions about post-high school plans.

Supports, Services, and Guidance

Category	Number of Individuals
School Counselors or Teachers	6
Family Support	5
Self-Motivation or Initiative	4
Peers or Friends	3
Financial Aid or Scholarships	3
Mentorship or Networking	2
Disability Services	1
No Support	1

Reflections on Supports and Guidance

School Counselors or Teachers (6 individuals)

- High school counselors, Gear Up advisors, and college professors
- Practical advice, emotional encouragement, and exposure to different options
- Some noted that these supports were their primary or only source of guidance, especially when family lacked college experience.

Family Support (5 individuals)

- Ranged from strong expectations to pursue higher education to emotional and financial backing.
- Parents, grandparents, and extended relatives were often described as motivators or role models.
- In some cases, family support was implicit.

‘You’re perfectly capable of being able to excel in these classes.’... Don’t limit yourself just because you don’t like something or feel like you’re not good at it, because other people see other things in you.”

Reflections on Supports and Guidance (cont'd)

- **Self-Motivation or Initiative (4 individuals)**
 - Several individuals emphasized their own drive to succeed, especially when formal supports were lacking.
 - This was particularly common among first-generation students or those navigating complex educational transitions.
- **Peers or Friends (3 individuals)**
 - Peer influence came through shared experiences, word-of-mouth, and informal guidance.
 - Affinity groups and social circles also played a role in skill development and confidence-building.



TAKEAWAY 5:

Interviewees primarily highlighted informal sources of support; formal sources of support were not always visible or accessible.

Navigating a Complex Postsecondary Landscape

What the data show

- Many viable pathways
- Increasing complexity
- Nonlinear trajectories

What students describe

- Opaque systems
- Reliance on informal guidance
- Need for clearer roadmaps

QUESTIONS?

Policy Implications - Information Equity Is Key

- Using only a few factors, our analysis surfaced 12 distinct pathways. Students and their trusted adults need to know about **options beyond HS -> College -> Career**.
- Options such as reverse transfer programs may increase credential attainment, among the 30% of students in **Pathway 2: Some College, No Credential**.
- More research on which, where, and for whom non-degree **certificate pathways** are showing most promising short-term labor market outcomes.
- Students are relying on informal supports and may need more **information on the range of formal supports** that WA state offers such as OtterBot, various scholarship programs (WCG, College Bound, WSOS), Bridge to Finish program, etc.



DISCUSSION PROMPT 1

Do you have ideas for strategies that high schools could implement to try to improve equitable access to information about post-HS options? What do you think would be required for these strategies to be successful?



DISCUSSION PROMPT 2

Given that students who follow the same path can end up with very different earnings, what are some honest and useful ways that counselors, advisors, and others can talk to students about post-high-school options?

Coming Up

- Project Slide Deck
- Infographic
- Early Findings Brief
- Some College, No Credential Pathway Brief
- GitHub Repo + Toolkit
- Report
- Journal Article

THANK YOU

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