

## Conclusions and Key Takeaways

In 2022, Clover Park Technical College (CPTC) is developing a new strategic plan to best serve its students and residents of Pierce County. Amid rapid change in the national CTC landscape, labor market, and disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21, there are several key takeaways from the research:

### **Nationally, enrollment in CTCs is in decline, and CPTC is not immune to this trend.**

- From 2011 to 2021, fall enrollment at CPTC declined by an annual rate of 5.4%, with the sharpest declines occurring in fall 2020 amid a national enrollment decline due to the COVID pandemic. Enrollment continued to decline in fall 2021.
- Enrollment decline was seen across all CTCs in Pierce County, in Washington, and across the United States where average national enrollment declined by 10% from 2019 to 2020.
- High school graduates are increasingly less likely to enroll in a CTC after graduation: in 2019, only 23% of high school graduates enrolled in CTC, down from 32% in 2009–2010, while more are likely to enroll in a 4-year college or enter the workforce.

### **Employers are increasingly likely to consider alternatives to a 4-year college degree because unemployment is low and significant shortages persist in technical occupations including nursing, cybersecurity, and manufacturing.**

- Unemployment reached record lows in Pierce County at the end of 2021 and continues to be low across the county and the greater Seattle-Tacoma metro area. Management, human resources, and recruiting leads in the tech and manufacturing industries expressed an increased willingness to hire employees with certificates and associate's degrees for positions that until recently required a bachelor's degree for entry.

### **Pierce County is an attractive and growing community with access to high-wage skilled jobs for workers without a 4-year college degree. However, housing affordability and income inequality are urgent issues that affect residents' economic well-being.**

- As part of the Seattle-Tacoma metro area, Pierce County residents have access to high-wage jobs in the STW, defined as high-tech jobs that do not require a 4-year college degree, including in software and IT, nursing and healthcare, construction and trades, manufacturing, and service technicians, which made up nearly 20% of the workforce in 2021. Many of these positions offer six-figure median salaries.
- From 2021–2022, housing prices in Pierce County increased by 19.6% to a median value of over \$460,000, lower than neighboring King County but one of the highest in the nation. The continued growth of the Seattle-Tacoma metro area and high-wage jobs in the tech industry in King County will affect the

economy of Pierce County, because tech workers have more options for remote work.

- Pierce County has a wide income disparity between White and non-White households: on average, a Black household earns 32% less and a Hispanic or Latino household earns 25% less than a White household in the county.

**CPTC serves a diverse student body, and its programs directly address regional needs in high-growth, high-wage sectors, including IT, construction and trades, and manufacturing.**

- CPTC serves a diverse student body: students are more likely to be women (66%), students of color (51%), and older than 25 (62%).
- CPTC's largest credential programs including IT (390 awards in 2021), manufacturing (306 awards), and healthcare (207 awards) directly correspond to some of the highest growth sectors in the region.

**There is a shortage and high demand for healthcare professionals in Pierce County and the surrounding area. CPTC programs, including nursing, dental assistant, medical technician, pharmacy tech, and other healthcare certificates, are directly serving those needs, but shortages remain high.**

- The nursing profession is facing severe staffing shortages in Pierce County and across the United States with high turnover due to pandemic resignations and retirements, travel nursing, and burnout.
- Demand is high for direct roles (LPNs, RNs, nursing assistants), supporting roles (ultrasound and diagnostic technicians), and other specialists such as ophthalmology and pharmacy technicians. Shortages in high-demand direct roles have increased the importance of the supporting roles.
- Front-end costs can be a barrier for the supporting roles because nondegree programs are difficult to get student loans for.
- Nursing can offer a long-term career trajectory for a recent graduate because a nursing assistant with a certificate can train to be an LPN. Where federal funding is not available, other sources, such as the Washington State Hospital Employee Education and Training grant, offer opportunities for nurses to upskill and move into higher wage positions.
- Some hospitals are pursuing Magnet designation from the American Nurses Credentialing Center, which is causing an increased focus on staff credentials.

**Employers value personal relationships with faculty and graduates of CPTC but desire a stronger institutional relationship, better communication, and a deeper understanding of the programs and services CPTC can offer.**

- Across all industries, business contacts had a strong relationship with individual instructors or faculty members at CPTC but lacked a direct institutional contact or relationship. In nearly all cases, employer representatives desired greater two-way communication and opportunities for institutional connections. Many noted

that they had lost touch or lost regular communication with CPTC during the pandemic in 2020–2021.

- Employers had very positive opinions of CPTC instructors and programs, noting that graduates had the necessary skills and abilities to work in the field. However, they expressed frustration with institutional communication and a lack of understanding about current CPTC initiatives such as equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts.
- In some industries, staff turnover and disruptions from 2020–2021 resulted in new people in human resources and management who have a willingness and openness to establish new institutional relationships.

**Across all industries, employers emphasized and value skills and work experience but noted that CPTC does not offer as many programs as its peer CTCs.**

- Employers highly value internships and experiential learning and look for staff with relevant experience in the industry.
- Apprenticeships are one tool for strengthening students' access to work-based learning, but CPTC's program is small. In 2021, CPTC awarded 81 credentials for apprenticeships, while Bates awarded 321, for comparison. Employers expressed high satisfaction with the experiential learning and apprenticeship programs at Bates.
- Employers expressed a willingness to design experiential learning programs and receive interns from CPTC to help students earn work experience.

**Employers across industries are looking for cross-cutting skills in data analytics and IT.**

- Employers in manufacturing, nursing, retail, and construction trades emphasized the importance of digital technologies, including data analytics, enterprise resource planning, automation, coding and programming, and cybersecurity.
- Employers ranging from construction to manufacturing to healthcare are currently hiring consultants and conducting staff training to get their personnel up to speed on digital technologies.
- New positions such as nurse informaticists that combine healthcare with data analytics are emerging and may become common.

**Information is limited from employers in cybersecurity and IT, the largest degree program.**

- Despite outreach efforts, RTI was unable to interview any employers in the cybersecurity/IT and logistics industries. As a result, this report does not represent their views. Because these are some of the largest degree programs at CPTC, more efforts should be undertaken to solicit feedback from these types of companies to collect their perceptions about CPTC.
- Industries including local government, retail, and manufacturing expressed a need to hire graduates in cybersecurity and IT. Many IT graduates are going to work for employers outside of the IT sector.

- Between Pierce and King Counties, approximately 99% of the jobs in tech companies are in King County, and they offer attractive six-figure salaries. Tech firms are also increasingly likely to shift to long-term remote or hybrid work models.

**Federal financial aid is limited to degree programs, whereas the majority of CPTC graduates earn certificates. Changes to federal policy being negotiated in Congress may change eligibility and scope of Pell Grant funding.**

- CPTC awards the largest number of nondegree certificates in Pierce County (more than 1,200 in 2021), many of which are not eligible for federal financial aid such as Pell Grants.
- At the time of writing, changes to the Pell Grant program are being considered in Congress under the Bipartisan Innovation Act to allow more flexibility for short-term and nondegree certificate programs<sup>1213</sup>. These include the House’s America COMPETES Act<sup>14</sup> and the Senate’s USICA Act<sup>15</sup>, currently in negotiation in June of 2022.

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<sup>12</sup> Some college lenders want short term Pell for online programs. What guardrails would be needed?” *Higher Ed Dive*. June 30, 2022. Accessed at <https://www.highereddive.com/news/some-college-leaders-want-short-term-pell-for-online-programs-what-guardra/626336/>

<sup>13</sup> “Expand Pell Grants to make the dream of college possible for more” *The Seattle Times*. Opinion, June 14, 2022. Accessed at <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/expand-pell-grants-to-make-the-dream-of-college-possible-for-more/>

<sup>14</sup> H.R. 4521, Accessed at <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr4521/BILLS-117hr4521pcs.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> S. 1260, Accessed at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1260/text>