

Mandated Prerequisites and their Impact on Community College Student Transfer

April 2024

Carrie E. Henderson, Ph.D., Senior Advisor



Community colleges are inherently American. They serve as accessible pathways to higher education for many individuals, offering a range of programs from noncredit workforce training to associate degrees to, in some states, bachelor's degrees. Community colleges boast open door admission policies, making them particularly inclusive and reflective of America's commitment to education and opportunity for all.

Additionally, community colleges play a vital role in workforce development, providing skills training that aligns with the needs of local industries. Their affordability and flexibility cater to a diverse student population, including recent high school graduates, working adults, and individuals seeking to enhance their skills or change careers.

While community colleges receive praise and recognition for their role in workforce education, it's equally important to recognize their importance in preparing students to transfer. The two aren't mutually exclusive.

With the recent emphasis on increasing educational attainment at both state and federal levels, along with incentives for workforce development through funding opportunities, it's understandable that community colleges are leading the way in delivering workforce instruction.

At the same time, we should not forget about the other side of community colleges' dual mission of preparing students for transfer. A recent Community College Research Center¹ report indicated that more than 80 percent of community college students intend to transfer.

While the "general transfer" degree consists primarily of general education, students have opportunities to build in courses that count toward their bachelor's degree—a degree that will increase their lifetime earnings and job prospects.

States may vary in their terminology for a general transfer degree—associate in arts, liberal arts degree, associate degree for transfer, etc.—but the foundation is typically the same: colleges provide the equivalent of two years (full-time) of undergraduate instruction that serves as a foundation for admission to a four-year institution with junior standing. While general education courses comprise the majority of the general transfer degree, there is typically some flexibility for students to take "elective" credit.

Ideally, this "elective credit" should be utilized to fulfill program requirements or prerequisites for admission, ensuring a smooth transition into a four-year program. Guided Pathways initiatives have made strides in refining community college course sequencing to better align with students' objectives.

However, significant policy change is needed to address the overabundance of university prerequisite requirements and student access to financial aid, including Pell, once they've completed the requirements for the associate degree.

The current Federal Student Aid Handbook indicates: "If a student is enrolled in courses that do not count toward his degree, certificate, or other recognized credential, they cannot be used to determine enrollment status unless they are eligible remedial courses."

Consider this scenario:

- Stephanie enrolled in an AA Program at a community college with the intent to transfer to an engineering bachelor's degree at a university.
- Stephanie met all the requirements for the AA degree, including 36 hours of general education and 24 hours of elective credit. To comply with FSA policy, the college conferred the degree.
- The university requires 45 hours of prerequisites for admission. While Stephanie completed 33 of those hours as at the community college, she needs to take the remaining 12 hours of courses to be admitted.
- Stephanie is now a non-degree seeking student, which means she is not eligible for federal aid. However, she does not have the money out of pocket to complete the 12 hours. She stops pursuing the bachelor's degree since she was relying on Pell to cover the costs of instruction.

Figure 1 shows an illustration of how community college students aren't on the same level playing field as university students when it comes to accessing aid to fully cover the cost of program prerequisite courses.

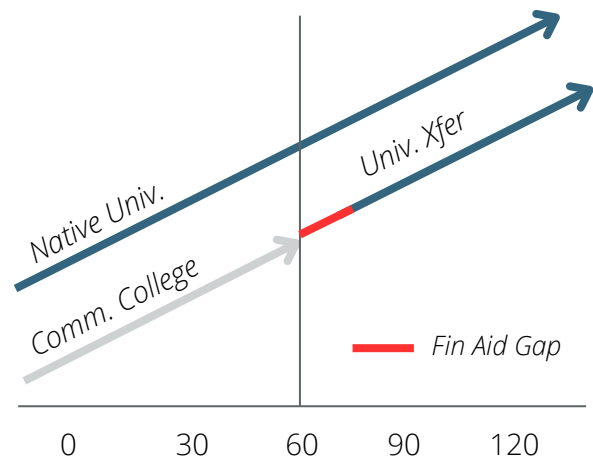


Figure 1: Illustration of Gap in Financial Aid for Students Completing Associate Degree Who Need Prerequisites for University Admission²

This problem isn't attributable to a single source; rather, it arises from a convergence of various factors.

The first challenge relates to student course enrollment patterns in community colleges. Setting aside the psychological, physiological, and social factors that are necessary to support student persistence (Maslow before Bloom), academic program and other graduation requirements can present challenges for students.

While some students may start community college knowing exactly what they want to study and where they want to enroll *eventually*, the reality is that many students are still figuring it out. They may come in undecided, decide to transfer to another institution, or change their mind about what they want to study. All of these decisions add hours to the student's transcript.

Additionally, community college state or institutional requirements may limit the number of hours that students have to work toward their common prerequisites—requiring students to enroll in course-level prerequisites (e.g., intermediate algebra prior to college algebra) and enroll in courses designed to address specific requirements such as student life skills, ethics, speech, or civic literacy courses.

Strong course sequences can help students stay on track but, taken together, even the most prepared students may face obstacles completing everything required of them in those first 60 hours.

The next challenge is the four-year institutional prerequisite requirements. In this case, I am referring to course prerequisites for program admission. (However, heavy course prerequisite requirements exacerbate the issue.)

It is indisputable that prerequisites are an important component for many bachelor's degree programs, particularly in STEM fields, to ensure that students have a solid understanding of foundational concepts before program admission and more advanced coursework.

While most four-year bachelor's degrees won't require 45 hours of prerequisite courses, unnecessary prerequisites can be speed bumps to program admission or a reason for a student to stop out.

Lastly, the FSA requirement that students be enrolled in a program of study to receive Title IV unintentionally creates a financial aid gap for students who started at community colleges. The FSA provides for students who need developmental education coursework to receive aid for those courses. The same logic can apply here—cover the costs for courses that students are required to complete to progress toward degree completion.

These three illustrations are not all-encompassing root causes, nor are they meant to pass the blame on any single institution. Rather, they are a reminder of the importance of routinely evaluating the impact of specific policies, regardless of intention.

Just as there is no single problem, there are no single solutions. Where to start?

Recommendation: Community colleges should reexamine institutional and program graduation requirements.

Community colleges should review their graduation and program requirements to ensure that unintentional obstacles do not prevent students from persisting. Requiring a course because “we've always done it this way” is not a compelling reason. Rather, consider what students *actually need* to be successful at your and their transfer institution.

Recommendation: Four-year institutions should revisit program prerequisite requirements.

The same logic applies. Prerequisite courses should not be established to exist in perpetuity, untouched. It is necessary to routinely review admission requirements in view of what students actually need vs. what faculty want to teach.

Recommendation: Create a route for impacted students to receive financial aid to complete the required prerequisites.

Advocacy to support changes to the FSA Handbook could solve this problem. Absent a federal change, states should consider establishing an aid fund to cover the cost of tuition and fees for impacted students' prerequisite courses. Alternatively, permitting AA degrees with varying program lengths—as Florida has done through the passage of HB 1285 (2024)—would be a way to maintain degree-seeking status for financial aid eligibility.

Endnotes

¹ Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya-Guevara, M., Jenkins, D., & LaViolet, T. (2024.) *Tracking Transfer: Community College and Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment*. Community College Research Center.

² Council of Presidents. (2017). *Federal Financial Aid Gap for Florida College System AA requirement completers*.

Insight creates impact.
Let us show you how.