



GREAT ADMISSIONS REDESIGN IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES PROFILE
NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY (NAU)
UNIVERSAL ADMISSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Lumina Foundation has supported the reshaping and simplifying of the admissions process to transform how potential students apply, enroll, and access institutions through [The Great Admissions Redesign](#). In partnership with the Foundation, Research for Action (RFA) conducted an evaluation of the three implementation grantees to foster learning and continuous improvement. To build our understanding about the work being done by each of the grantees, RFA conducted interviews with grantee leaders, institutional administrators and high school staff and analyzed admissions and enrollment data to capture the strategies, outcomes, and lessons learned from the initiative. This implementation profile provides early learnings for the field based on our analyses.

ADMISSIONS REDESIGN: CONTEXT AND CONDITIONS

Understanding the larger context and conditions in which postsecondary education reform takes place, as well as the resources and stakeholders involved in the work, is critical to make sense of the reform's design, as well as the larger lessons learned. Northern Arizona University or [NAU](#) is a public, four-year postsecondary institution that offers bachelor's and graduate degrees and is overseen by the [Arizona Board of Regents](#); however, Universal Admissions is not required through state or board policy. Based in Flagstaff, NAU has more than [20 sites](#) across Arizona and has a focus on postsecondary access, aligning it with the state's community colleges.

STATE POSTSECONDARY CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION FOR REDESIGN

Less than half of Arizona's high school graduates immediately enroll in a postsecondary institution, placing Arizona below the national average.ⁱ This shortfall in postsecondary access and the need for greater attainment drove the Arizona Attainment Alliance (A++), a partnership between NAU, nine of the state's 10 community college districts, and the Arizona Commerce Authority to develop **Universal Admissions**.

One of the goals for the Universal Admissions program is to contribute to the state's long-term economic mobility. Interview respondents frequently referenced Arizona's Access, Success, Attainment, Prosperity (ASAP) agenda as a guiding framework: "ASAP keeps us focused on what really matters, how many students we bring in, how many succeed, and how many can build better lives here in Arizona." Further, stakeholders emphasized access as a core operational principle: "NAU was built to serve students who would not otherwise have a shot at a bachelor's degree." Community college leaders echoed this, noting that their campuses understand local student realities: "We know our students [and] NAU knows how to get them to the finish line. Universal Admissions connects those strengths."

Universal admissions is designed to help meet statewide attainment goals. This admissions redesign is a direct response to Arizona's persistent postsecondary attainment gap and widening equity disparities. Arizona has a goal to have 60% of adults ages 25-64 with a professional certificate or college degree by 2030. As one administrator noted, "We cannot get where the state needs to go by continuing to exclude students." Universal Admissions was described as reframing traditional admissions criteria, positioning NAU as a key component in closing attainment gaps.

Institutional leaders saw traditional admissions structures as limiting postsecondary access. Universal admissions was developed, in part, to address the perception that traditional admissions structures were limiting college access in the state. Institutional leaders at NAU, including the president, saw a need to redesign the admissions process so that a larger proportion of high school graduates could enroll at the university and earn a four-year degree. Initially, the focus was on identifying structural barriers embedded in the existing admissions framework. As one interviewee explained, when a student received a denial letter, "that was the end of it." Without alternatives or knowledge of higher education systems, many students simply stopped pursuing college, especially first-generation and low-income learners. Universal Admissions replaced that dynamic with an alternate pathway into a partner community college and other early support to help students stay on track for a bachelor's degree.

Universal Admissions was first piloted with a local community college. As one of many partnerships between NAU and Coconino Community College, Universal Admissions was piloted in the fall 2023 semester and found promising results, which led to funding for the expansion of the program across nine of Arizona's community college districts.ⁱⁱ This work has been supported by NAU's president, José Luis Cruz Rivera, who started in 2021 and brought a renewed focus on expanding equitable access to postsecondary education.

CONDITIONS FOR UNIVERSAL ADMISSIONS

Respondents described the institutional conditions for admissions redesign in Arizona in the following ways:

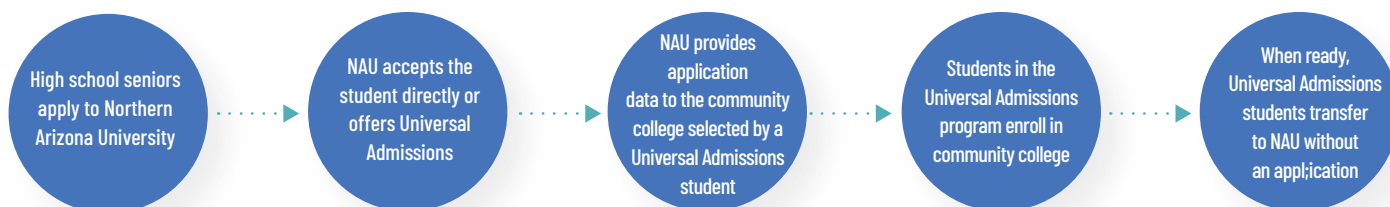
- **NAU has a strong relationship with community colleges partners.** These partnerships have developed over many years and built a strong sense of shared responsibility and trust that facilitates shared problem solving. As one participant explained, Universal Admissions may still be “clunky” as NAU and the participating community colleges develop new processes, but institutional staff are working together to step in where systems still fall short.
- **Universal admissions has been supported at NAU through strong leadership and a shared commitment to the institutional mission.** The president of NAU has been supportive of Universal Admissions and framed the reform as core to their institutional goals. Leadership upholding access and affordability as institutional goals has led to a shared commitment among staff across the institution to keep students at the center of the work.



THE ADMISSIONS REDESIGN: UNIVERSAL ADMISSIONS

Through this Universal Admissions Program, every applicant to NAU is either *admitted directly to the University* or is *given the opportunity to start their education at an Arizona community college before continuing at NAU* when they are ready. As one of many partnerships over more than a decade, NAU and Coconino Community College piloted this redesign in the fall 2023 semester and found promising results, which led to the expansion of the program across nine of Arizona’s community college districts. The process is outlined in Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1 | Universal Admissions Process



As outlined in Figure 1, Universal Admissions is a dual admissions program in which students are admitted to both NAU and a community college. Applicants who do not immediately meet the requirements to be admitted to NAU are offered Universal Admissions and connected to a local community college district with an assurance that they will be able to transfer into NAU without an additional application when they are ready. This requires students to take the initial steps of deciding to apply to college and applying to NAU, but if they do so, they will not be denied acceptance.

Unlike other programs that involve transfer from a community college to a university, Universal Admissions does not require the completion of a set number of credits or a credential, instead allowing students to transfer from a community college to NAU when they are “ready.” It also does not require an application for transfer, eliminating that barrier in the process, as well as a transfer application fee.

IMPLEMENTATION AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Institutions involved in Universal Admissions have focused on keeping the admissions and transfer processes simple for students, even as they continue to build and refine the data systems behind these processes. One participant described the work as “building the plane as we’re flying it.”

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

NAU and partnering community college districts are working on the development and implementation of several strategies related to Universal Admissions:

- Create a single application process between NAU and community colleges:** In order for Universal Admissions students to transfer seamlessly to NAU from a participating community college, the program is working on the development of a single application across both NAU and partnering community colleges; currently, they are utilizing NAU’s admissions application. As one respondent said, “We created a lot of manual clunkiness to give the students a one-application look.”
- Develop systems to seamlessly transfer students from community college to NAU without an application:** The program will also develop a transfer process for students from participating community colleges to NAU without reapplying for transfer. This may be as simple as allowing student data systems to automatically “turn a flag back on” to indicate that a community college student “is now at NAU.” Until the process is automated, a process ticket has been used so that students are given NAU admitted status and can enroll in classes at the University once they are ready to transfer.
- Conduct outreach with K12 districts about the Universal Admissions program:** A++ partners plan to communicate with K12 districts about the Universal Admissions program, marketing the benefits of the program and encouraging students to take advantage of the opportunity. Based on our sample of interviews with counselors from feeder high schools, information at the secondary level about Universal Admissions is limited.

- Build automated systems for application processing, transcript evaluation and data sharing across campuses:** NAU and community college partners currently process, convert, and combine the data collected for Universal Admissions manually, each using a different student information system on their individual campus, but this initiative provides an opportunity to build an automated system across campuses. At the same time, bridging data systems across institutions with different technological infrastructure, staff levels, and IT support requires a customized approach for each community college as they work through the transition.

NAU and community colleges have had to augment or shift staff to support successful implementation.

Community colleges have created positions dedicated to Universal Admissions, ensuring students have a clear point of contact. One advisor explained that they “needed someone who could work directly with [Universal Admissions] students.” Institutional staff are also navigating cultural and structural differences between open-access community colleges and the more selective university environment of NAU that do not always align.

Student advising services have also been expanded to support Universal Admissions. Institutional respondents stressed that structures and systems only matter if they translate into meaningful support for students so that they feel informed, welcomed, and connected to the resources they need to succeed. Advisors have expanded outreach and counseling opportunities, so students feel connected from admission through enrollment. As one respondent explained, “ongoing, intentional communication [with students]... is evolving.”



STUDENT ADMISSIONS DATA

As Universal Admissions rolled out, institutions quickly realized that one of the challenges would be data sharing through the application, enrollment, and transfer processes. NAU and their partner community colleges addressed this issue in the following ways:

- **NAU developed a Universal Admissions Code to identify students:** As mentioned previously, many institutions involved in Universal Admissions utilized different student information systems not designed to communicate with one another. As one administrator reported, “We’re all in different systems... some using Banner... some PeopleSoft... some Salesforce... we have to mash it all up.” NAU developed a practical workaround by creating a Universal Admissions code to tag students who come through this pathway. As one respondent explained, “We’re tracking... a specific Universal Admissions code,” allowing NAU to follow students from application to enrollment. Further, the customer relationship manager (CRM) tracks the community colleges where students intend to enroll: “We can see who raised their hand for Coconino, Arizona Western, Pima [and other community colleges].” When combined, the two systems provide a more complete picture of Universal Admission student activities.
- **Data sharing agreements were embedded into admissions applications:** To facilitate application data being shared across institutions, NAU included student consent as part of the admissions application. “Students acknowledged their data would come over,” one administrator shared, building transparency from the start. Registrars then formalized what data could be shared and under what protections. Existing partnership agreements also helped facilitate the process; more specifically, the organizations and institutions involved in the A++ initiative coordinated agreement signatures. As one interviewee noted, “A++ managed all the data sharing agreements” across campuses, reinforcing the importance of the Universal Admissions program.

COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT THE ADMISSIONS REDESIGN

Admissions redesign needs to be clearly explained to many different stakeholder groups, including postsecondary institutions, the K12 sector, students, and their families.

To support ongoing communications during the application and enrollment processes for students offered Universal Admissions, NAU created structured outreach practices. This process begins with automated emails introducing Universal Admissions to students who have applied to NAU but have not been immediately accepted and connecting them with a community college contact. However, there can be a period of “dead space” as student files are being transferred from NAU to a community college, during which students might feel unsure about their next steps. “We realized there were months where nothing was happening,” one advisor shared. In response, NAU and its partners have included more frequent touchpoints, texts, phone calls, and personalized check-ins, so students remain engaged through each step. Interview respondents explained that student communication is not only about delivering instructions but also building connections; as one respondent said, “students need a connection with someone” at the institution.

High school counselors did not appear to be familiar with Universal Admissions. In speaking with a small sample of high school guidance counselors and other staff from feeder high schools proximal to NAU campuses and participating community colleges, respondents were not familiar with Universal Admissions. They often had not heard of the program or were not knowledgeable enough about it to share their perspectives. While not a generalizable sample, this indicates that plans to communicate with K12 districts about the Universal Admissions program, marketing the benefits of the program, and encouraging students to take advantage of the opportunity are still in process.

FINANCIAL AID

As one of the most significant barriers to postsecondary education, redesigning an admissions process should include support in accessing financial aid. While Universal Admissions does not include a dedicated scholarship fund for participating students, the reduced cost of community college attendance can help students cover tuition in their first two years, with some also receiving support for transportation or other basic needs. Additionally, through Universal Admissions:

- **Information on financial aid eligibility is shared with both NAU and community colleges:** When Universal Admissions students submit the FAFSA, their information is shared with both NAU and community colleges to review eligibility without additional forms. Students from families earning \$65,000 or less automatically qualify for NAU's Access to Excellence tuition guarantee, which covers remaining tuition after federal aid is applied. This approach reduces the paperwork burden that often discourages low-income and first-generation students from pursuing college.
- **Advisors discuss financial aid as part of their outreach with Universal Admissions students:** Discussions may include an explanation of available scholarships, assistance in completing forms, and planning for transfer. Close relationships between NAU and the community colleges have led to responsive solutions before small issues become barriers to student access.

However, respondents raised concerns about sustainability as the program grows. The existing aid works for limited cohorts, but scaling Universal Admissions to more students may require additional investment and a more formal funding structure. While affordability is already a core component of the initiative, maintaining that commitment at scale will be critical to ensuring the program continues to reach the students who stand to benefit the most.



EARLY REDESIGN OUTCOMES

Short-term outcomes for the Universal Admissions program include meeting implementation milestones and improving student outcomes, specifically:



Scale-up of Universal Admissions across Arizona community college districts;



Elimination of multiple applications as barriers for student's admission/transfer;



Increase in student enrollment and retention at NAU and participating community colleges;



Increase in certificate and associate degree attainment at community colleges; and



Increase in students transferring from community colleges to NAU.

Stakeholders involved in the work hope that the longer term impact of Universal Admissions will include an **increase in bachelor's degree attainment** to more closely reflect the national average; an **increase in highly skilled members of the state workforce**, a **reduction in the achievement and attainment gaps** among underrepresented students, and **greater economic mobility and social impact** in Arizona leading towards greater prosperity in the state.

This section leverages data shared by NAU and from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a system of surveys conducted annually by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). These data were used to assess early changes in redesign outcomes. The analysis examines changes in application, admission, and enrollment numbers from fall 2021 through fall 2025. Fall 2021 and fall 2022 serve as pre-implementation reference years. Fall 2023 represents the pilot year with Coconino Community College, during which Universal Admissions was available through a single partner institution. Fall 2024 marks the first year of broader expansion, when Universal Admissions extended to additional community college partners, and fall 2025 is the second year of that expanded implementation. Admission and enrollment data are analyzed with and without Universal Admissions (UA) students, thus showing that by offering students an alternative pathway rather than an admissions denial, the program has expanded the number of students who receive an offer of admission and access to a postsecondary institution.

APPLICATIONS AND ADMISSIONS

Figure 2 displays the number of first-time freshmen who applied and the number who were admitted both including and excluding students admitted through the Universal Admissions pathway, from fall 2021 through fall 2025. Figure 3 displays the year-over-year percent change in those same metrics.

FIGURE 2 | Number of applicants and admissions, both including and excluding Universal Admissions (UA), Fall 2021 – 2025

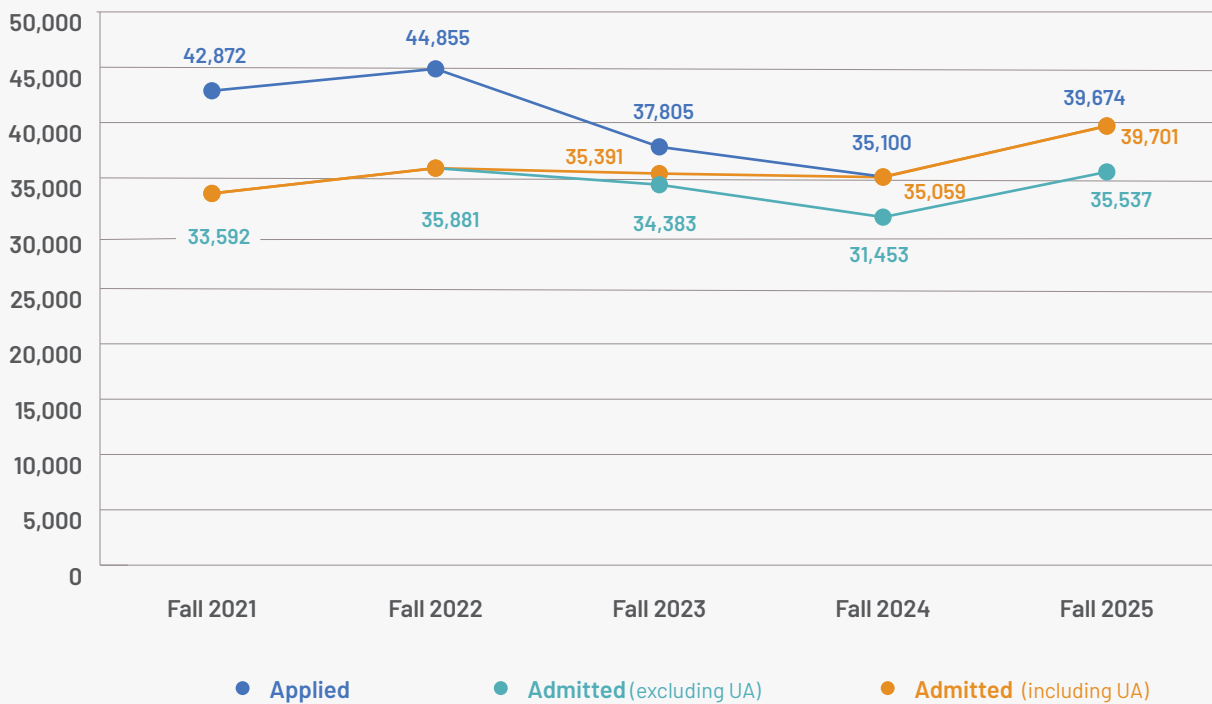
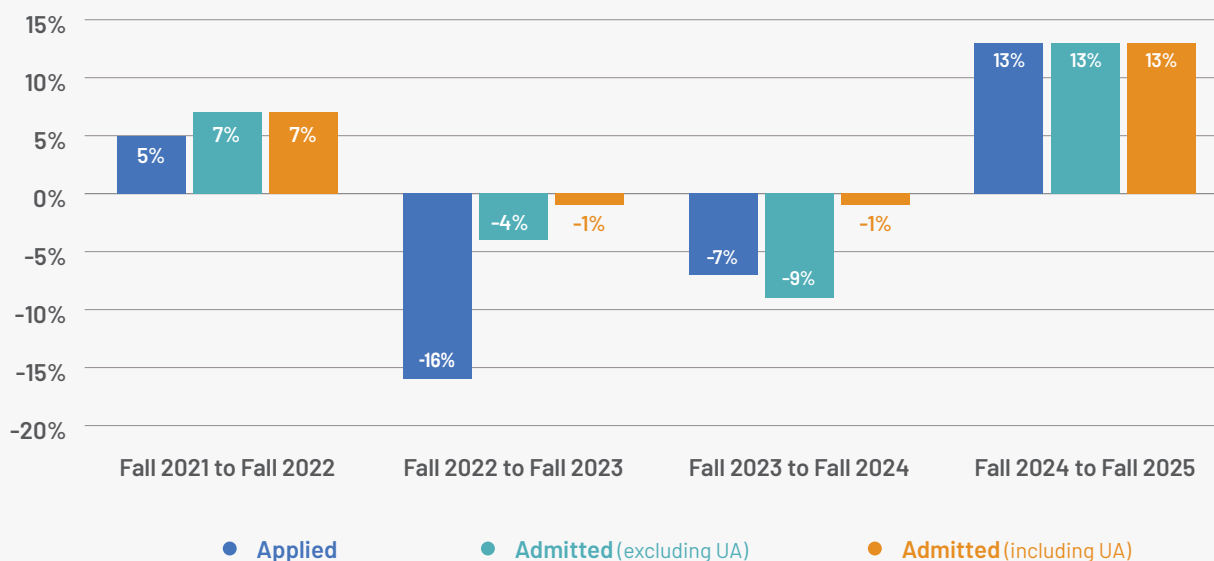


FIGURE 3 | Percentage change in applicants and admissions, both including and excluding Universal Admissions (UA), Fall 2021 – 2025



Applications to NAU were growing modestly in the pre-implementation period, but declined during initial implementation. Prior to the launch of UA, applications rose 5% between fall 2021 and fall 2022 (from 42,872 to 44,855). In fall 2023, the year of the Coconino Community College pilot, applications declined by 16% (to 37,805), continuing into fall 2024 with a further decline of 7% (to 35,100), before rebounding 13% in fall 2025 (to 39,674).

Universal Admissions had a clear and decisive impact on acceptance rates. Prior to implementation, admissions excluding and including UA were identical, as no UA pathway existed. In fall 2023, the Coconino Community College pilot year, admissions directly to NAU, excluding UA, declined 4% (to 34,383) while admissions including UA declined by only 1% (to 35,391), as the pilot extended offers to students who would otherwise not have been admitted. This divergence widened considerably in fall 2024, when admissions directly to NAU, excluding UA, declined 9% (to 31,453) while admissions including UA declined just 1% (to 35,059). This difference in fall 2024 reflects the expanded network of partnering community colleges involved in the admissions redesign. In fall 2025, both admissions directly to NAU, excluding UA, and admissions including UA grew by 13% (to 35,537 and 39,701, respectively), matching the rebound in applications. Notably, admissions including UA effectively matched total applications in fall 2025, meaning virtually every student who applied received an offer of admission through one pathway or another. This is a direct reflection of the program’s goal of ensuring that no applicant is denied a postsecondary pathway.

ENROLLMENT

Figure 4 displays the number of first-time freshmen who enrolled from fall 2021 through fall 2025, including and excluding Universal Admissions-based enrollments. Figure 5 shows the year-over-year percentage change in first-time freshmen enrollment. The impact of Universal Admissions on enrollment becomes visible beginning in fall 2023, the Coconino Community College pilot year.

FIGURE 4 | Number of enrollments, both including and excluding Universal Admissions (UA), Fall 2021 – 2025

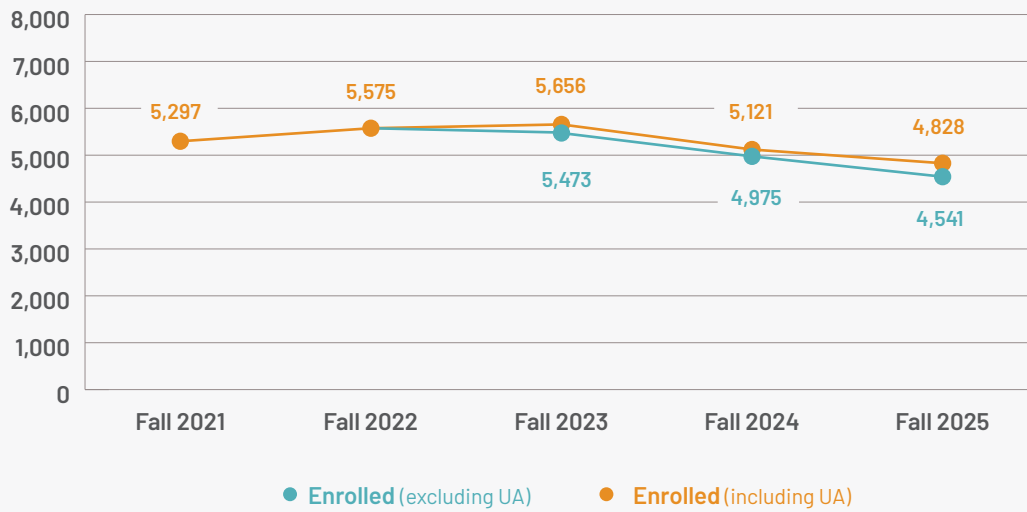
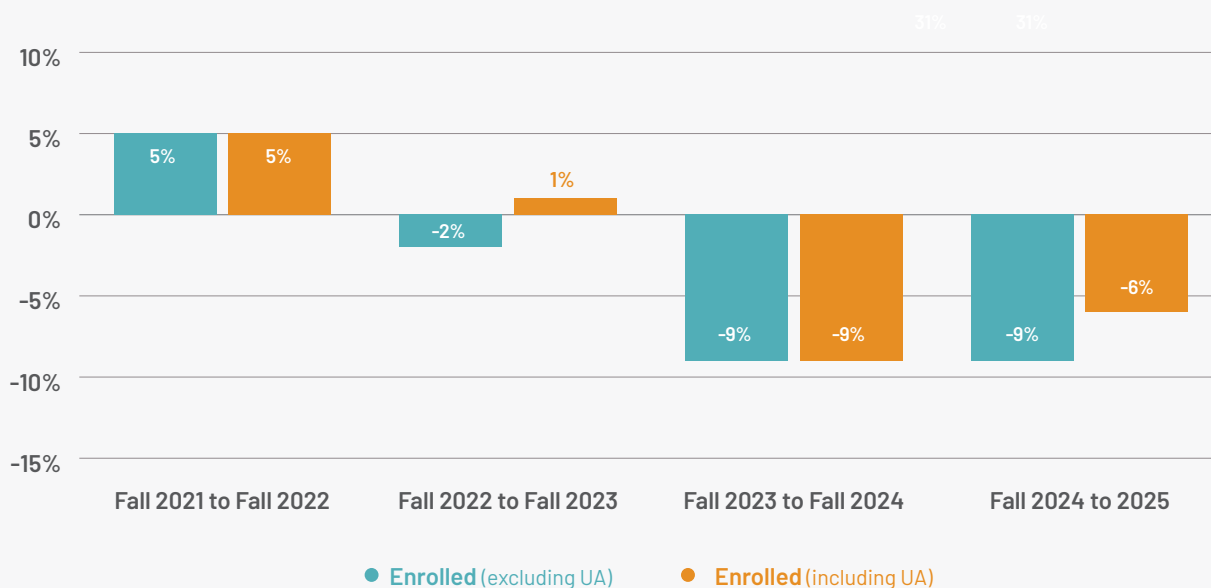


FIGURE 5 | Percentage change in enrollments, both including and excluding Universal Admissions (UA), Fall 2021 – 2025



Universal Admissions has consistently produced higher enrollment than would otherwise have been achieved, with the gap between enrollment excluding and including UA reaching its widest point in fall 2025. As shown in Figure 4, in the pre-implementation years enrollment excluding and including UA were identical, growing 5% between fall 2021 and fall 2022 (from 5,297 to 5,575). In fall 2023, the Coconino Community College pilot year, enrollment directly into NAU, excluding UA, declined by 2% (to 5,473) while enrollment including UA grew 1% (to 5,656). This difference was an early signal of the pilot’s potential to engage students who might otherwise not have enrolled, and it motivated the expansion of the program to other community colleges.

In fall 2024, both enrollment directly into NAU and enrollment including UA declined 9% (to 4,975 and 5,121, respectively), suggesting that the rapid expansion to additional partner institutions was still in process. In fall 2025, enrollment directly into NAU declined an additional 9% (to 4,541), while enrollment including UA declined more modestly by 6% (to 4,828). This smaller decline and larger overall enrollment suggests that the UA pathway is beginning to result in improved yield as the program matures. As the advising and support structures discussed earlier in this profile continue to develop, these enrollment figures may improve further in subsequent years.

SUCSESSES, CHALLENGES, AND EQUITY

Respondents identified a number of successes and challenges that may help to inform the work being done in other states, systems, and institutions, and are discussed in this section, as well as the ways in which Universal Admissions has helped to address issues of equity for students.

ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION SUCSESSES

The early successes of the Universal Admissions program include the following:

- **An increase in postsecondary access and enrollment:** The pilot Universal Admissions program with NAU and Coconino Community College resulted in Universal Admissions offers to just over 1000 students in fall 2023; ultimately just under 200 of them enrolled in classes at Coconino Community College, representing a notable increase in postsecondary access for these students.
- **Scaling the Universal Admissions program from one community college pilot to the majority of two-year institutions in the state:** Based on the success of the Coconino Community College pilot, additional active A++ Universal Admissions community colleges include: Arizona Western College, Central Arizona College, Cochise College, Mohave Community College, and Pima Community College (Fall 2024); and Maricopa Community College District (Fall 2025); with Chandler-Gilbert Community College, Phoenix College, and Scottsdale Community College to follow.
- **More seamless college admissions for students:** Once students are offered and accept Universal Admissions and select a community college, NAU staff can access their application information directly and move it into the local community college system making the enrollment process feel like one continuous pathway.

ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Any new policy comes with challenges; interview respondents identified the following in the adoption and implementation of Universal Admissions:

- **Variation in capacity across institutions:** Differences in institutional capacity levels across community colleges shape how Universal Admissions processes have been adopted and implemented.
 - » **Staffing Levels:** The number of institutional staff across participating community colleges creates variation in implementation. For example, some community colleges have transfer navigators who provide advising support to students, while others struggle to offer even one reliable point of contact for students. Staff turnover has also been an issue, particularly in front-line recruiting roles where pay is low and positions frequently change hands. Some colleges were able to hire staff to support Universal Admissions, while others have asked existing staff to take on more responsibilities without additional time or resources.
 - » **Technological Capacity:** The information technology systems used to support the admissions and transfer processes also vary. Larger institutions such as Maricopa Community College have stronger information technology support and systems automation, while smaller partners are stretched thin in this area, having to rely on manual data entry with minimal staffing. For example, community colleges vary in their information systems, making the development of admissions automation challenging. Manual data entry and file transfers are still the norm, even as teams work to add tools like SFTP or state systems such as ASSIST.

- **Student communication early in the process:** Once a student was offered admission, it could be difficult to make and maintain contact to establish a relationship. As one respondent explained, “Just reaching out to the students... making that first initial connection is hard.” Engagement often improves once students are introduced to an institutional point of contact, so some colleges now offer welcome sessions and virtual orientations to help create that early connection.
- **Manual application data processes:** Without automated data sharing, institutional staff often import files and reconcile spreadsheet errors by hand. “Every other week we were getting a request to have a new report... it literally takes hundreds of hours.” one respondent described.
- **Coordination across institutional departments:** Universal Admissions requires working across multiple offices and departments within an institution, including admissions, advising, information technology, and enrollment management, among others. One staff member explained that “everyone supports it, but no one owns it.”
- **Confusion due to multiple admissions and transfer initiatives:** Respondents reported misunderstandings about other admissions and transfer programs that created confusion for both staff and students. For example, the AZ Ahead and 2NAU programs are similar initiatives with services to help students persist and graduate from a community college and transfer to NAU. Further, some scholarships are connected to one initiative but not another, requiring advisors to provide additional guidance to students; as one respondent explained, the program overlap “made everything feel more complicated than it needed to be.”

As participants pointed out, a single shared application across NAU and the community colleges is still years away, meaning temporary workarounds will be utilized in the meantime. Despite these obstacles, respondents reported that institutional staff remain optimistic and motivated by the importance of this work.

EQUITY FOR STUDENTS

It is critical to support all students, especially those who have been traditionally underserved, such as first generation students. The following aspects of Universal Admissions supports increased equity:

- **Universal Admissions was designed to remove longstanding financial and procedural barriers that prevent underserved students from pursuing four-year degrees.** By creating an affordable and guaranteed pathway from community college to NAU, the program provides access for students who might otherwise be discouraged by rising tuition costs, complicated admissions steps, or uncertainty about the overall process. Further, other initiatives, such as NAU’s Access to Excellence, were described as “critical equity levers,” automatically covering the remaining tuition for students from households earning under \$65,000 without requiring a separate application. This streamlined process ensures that affordability is not just promised but delivered, enabling students to plan to pursue a bachelor’s degree rather than opting out due to financial barriers.
- **Universal Admissions is also a model that builds aspirations by affirming students’ potential and reinforcing their sense of belonging in a university environment.** Guaranteeing a clear route to NAU helps students who might not initially see themselves as “university material” develop confidence and long-term academic goals. NAU’s intentional design of integrating advising into the program further strengthens equity by ensuring students are supported throughout the entire process, starting from the moment they express interest. Instead of navigating systems on their own, they are paired with advisors who connect them to resources to ensure they stay on track. This support structure reduces the risk that students, particularly first-generation and low-income learners, will fall through institutional gaps.

LESSONS LEARNED

In this final section of the profile, we will discuss the arguments that were effective in the state for admissions redesign, the collaboration and communication taking place, the unintended consequences of the reform, and overall lessons learned.

ARGUMENTS FOR ADMISSIONS REDESIGN

While admissions redesigns have developed in states and systems across the country, it can still be a challenge in some circumstances and with some constituencies to make the case for this type of reform, especially in light of common concerns around student data privacy. Respondents in Arizona indicated that the following arguments supported buy-in for this initiative:

- **Address concerns around decreased enrollment and transfer:** By presenting the initiative as a way to stabilize the student pipeline and “fill in those [enrollment] gaps,” redesign leaders helped others see Universal Admissions as essential to preventing students from slipping away unnecessarily. As one person explained, “Community colleges are still dealing with low enrollments... students are taking longer to transfer or finish.” Another added, “If NAU is not communicating with the student, then who is? These students are falling through the cracks.” Universal Admissions was framed as a proactive, cost-effective approach to keep students connected to the university, protect enrollment, and ensure more of them make it to completion.
- **Focus on making the process easier for students:** Universal Admissions reduces the admissions requirements that privilege students who are well-resourced. Stakeholders described it as a model that cuts paperwork, removes repetitive steps, and uses automation, so students are not left to coordinate the admissions and transfer processes on their own.

COLLABORATION

State or system admissions redesigns cannot be developed in a bubble. It is critical that policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholder groups work together and learn from each other in designing, adopting and implementing the redesign. Collaboration was happening on a number of levels to support Universal Admissions:

- **A++ retreats and working groups were used as opportunities for collaboration.** Colleges and NAU met face-to-face every six months through multi-day A++ retreats and worked together focusing on advising, orientation, and data. These meetings gave partners time to talk about what was working, what was not, and how implementation looked in practice across different colleges.
- **Collaboration across colleges was intentionally built into the implementation process.** Participants described a culture of openness, where materials and strategies were regularly shared with one another. As one interviewee explained, “There’s nothing that we try to do in secret... if there’s a template [being used by one institution], there is a strong partnership to share that.” Further, institutions shared workarounds for manual data uploads, compared approaches to secure file transfers, and learned from peers using similar systems.
- **Colleges that implemented Universal Admissions earlier served as informal learning partners for more recent adopters.** These early adopters shared lessons about timelines, common pitfalls, and strategies for engaging students, helping community colleges that implemented the program more recently to avoid similar challenges.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Policies will often lead to outcomes no one expected or intended as part of a new initiative or program.

Respondents identified the following unexpected consequences from Universal Admissions:

- The implementation of multiple programs similar to Universal Admissions created confusion among students, counselors, and staff, who often struggled to differentiate between the initiatives.** As one participant explained, “There’s been some confusion... about how this program differs from existing programs like the 2NAU.” Without the clear differentiation of programs, messaging was often inconsistent. Participants also emphasized a lack of public awareness. These challenges highlight the need for stronger communication strategies and potentially merging overlapping programs to reduce confusion among staff offering solutions to students. However, Universal Admissions has been institutionalized at NAU within the division of Strategic Enrollment and Marketing (SEM), showing the permanency of the program and alleviating some of the points of confusion with other programs.
- Initiative leaders described some unexpected benefits from cross-institution collaboration.** The structures built to support Universal Admissions such as biweekly operational meetings and twice-yearly retreats have strengthened communication, enhanced trust, and reinforced a shared responsibility for student success. As one participant explained, “It has actually strengthened our partnership with NAU... [we have] celebrated successes and worked through friction points,” highlighting a shift from episodic coordination to continuous joint problem-solving. Others described the partnership as collaborative, healthy, and productive, suggesting that not only has transfer navigation for students improved but also sparked a culture of redesign around admissions and enrollment.

OVERALL LESSONS LEARNED

In summarizing lessons learned, several themes emerge from the Universal Admissions Program:

- It is critical to establish a dedicated point person to coordinate the implementation of an admissions redesign initiative at the institutional level.** Colleges that assigned a point person to lead the work experienced smoother implementation and clearer communication. “I am the person who does the bi-weekly meetings... and I’ve been involved in the retreat planning,” one staff member said. Being present for decisions, not just relaying messages, helps prevent information from “getting lost in translation.” These roles have also strengthened relationships across institutions. Staff described a growing sense of shared purpose: “We are a team... it doesn’t seem like there’s two different institutions.”
- Ongoing communication across institutions is necessary to monitor progress and improve issues as they arise.** Regular meetings were described as helpful in identifying challenges early on, sharing student feedback, and adjusting procedures before additional problems could escalate. One participant stated, “Engage stakeholders early and often... create space to ask, ‘Is this working the way we think it is?’” Another explained, “We meet monthly... constantly talk about what is working... and where we go from here.”
- Clear and aligned data systems are essential for monitoring student progress and keeping them on track.** Early on, mismatched records created confusion across campuses about where students were in the admissions and transfer processes. Staff highlighted the need for shared lists and data flags that update in real time. As one person explained, “Our lists didn’t match so we fixed the process.” Working “as close to real time as possible” helps ensure students stay visible to advisors.

For additional information on this admissions redesign, see Research for Action’s Northern Arizona University logic model at researchforaction.org/admissions-redesign/5/



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Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision higher learning that is easy to navigate, addresses racial injustice, and meets the nation's talent needs through a broad range of credentials. We are working toward a system that prepares people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.

ENDNOTES

ⁱhttps://www.azregents.edu/sites/default/files/public/one-pagers/attainment_onepager_2021.pdf

ⁱⁱActive A++ Universal Admissions community colleges include Coconino Community College (Fall 2023), Arizona Western College (Fall 2024), Central Arizona College (Fall 2024), Cochise College (Fall 2024), Mohave Community College (Fall 2024), Pima Community College (Fall 2024), Maricopa Community College District (Fall 2025), Chandler-Gilbert Community College, Phoenix College, and Scottsdale Community College.