“Students don’t use algebra in Math 115, so why is it a prerequisite?”

There are two aspects to this. First, students do use algebra in Math 115, and second, algebra is part of the minimal requirements to begin as a college student.

Many students, especially the ones who struggle in algebra courses, don’t really know what algebra is, and so they don’t know when they’re using it. In algebra, students develop some of the mathematical habits of mind they need to be successful in Math 115. Mathematical habits of mind like organizing their thoughts and justifying solutions are essential for success in math 115. As far as specific skills go, students do encounter linear, exponential, and sometimes quadratic functions in Math 115, but they might not recognize them as such since they don’t look exactly like they did in algebra. More specifically, students solve equations when discussing the following topics: counting, probability, statistics, and finance.

Algebra doesn’t exist just as a prerequisite for Math 115. It’s a basic skill that all students are expected to have when they arrive at college. If we didn’t have an algebra requirement, entrance at EWU would be less rigorous than high school exit. Students need this college prerequisite to be successful in courses outside mathematics, such as the introductory physics, chemistry, and other science courses. Without an algebra requirement, we would also run into trouble with transfers, as an algebra prerequisite is a typical requirement at most 4 year (and 2-year) institutions and employers expect these skills and ways of thinking in college graduates.