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## **The Liberal Arts in Decline? Not When You Count Community Colleges**

*What's More, Grades in Humanities and Liberal Arts Are Strong Indicator of Transfer Success for Community College Students*

**New York, June 20, 2019** — Despite fears that the liberal arts are on the ropes, humanities and liberal arts education is not in decline in public colleges in the United States, according to a [new analysis](#) from the Community College Research Center.

Overall, the number of undergraduate liberal arts degrees awarded has risen since 2000, with increases at both two-year and four-year public colleges. Despite more recent declines in the number and share of humanities and liberal arts bachelor's degrees awarded by four-year colleges, the growth in liberal arts at community colleges has made up the difference. These findings counter the narrative that students are abandoning the liberal arts in droves and that liberal arts fields are in crisis.

A [second CCRC analysis](#) challenges the idea that there is little educational value in liberal arts coursework and that colleges and students should focus on STEM fields like science, math, and engineering or technical skills like welding. In fact, CCRC researchers found that academic success in liberal arts coursework at a community college is a strong predictor of success after students transfer to a four-year college. Liberal arts coursework is at least as good as non-liberal arts coursework in predicting four-year college outcomes.

"The humanities and liberal arts—measured by degrees awarded, majors, or course enrollments—remain a large, robust part of the U.S. postsecondary sector. If these fields are in crisis, so must be all college education," said Clive R. Belfield, one of the authors of the two new reports.

The first report—[Humanities and Liberal Arts Education Across America's Colleges: How Much Is There?](#) by Theo Pippins, Clive R. Belfield, and Thomas Bailey—looks at degrees awarded, enrollments by major, course requirements and coursework completed, providing a comprehensive picture of liberal arts at public colleges. The second report—[Humanities and Liberal Arts Education at Community College: How It Affects Transfer and Four-Year College Outcomes](#) by Theo Pippins and Clive R. Belfield—looks at the link between humanities and liberal arts coursework at community colleges and four-year colleges for transfer students.

## Key findings:

- The number and share of humanities and liberal arts degrees awarded annually by community colleges have risen since 2000, making up for a decline in the share of humanities and liberal arts bachelor's degrees.
  - The **number of associate degrees** in these fields grew by 88 percent—from 218,000 to 410,000—between 2000 and 2015. The **share of associate degrees** in these fields increased from 38 percent to 41 percent over that time.
  - The **number of bachelor's degrees** in these fields increased by 18 percent in that time—from 213,000 to 251,000—though the **share of bachelor's degrees** awarded in these fields fell from 17 percent to 13 percent.
- The **number and share of humanities and liberal arts majors** at two- and four-year public colleges have held roughly steady since 2007, after accounting for the Great Recession.
- All degrees, even STEM degrees, include a significant proportion of coursework in humanities and liberal arts. One third of all credits earned by students who graduate with associate degrees are in these fields. Even STEM and health associate degree earners take more than 20 percent of their credits in humanities and liberal arts.
- While the number of bachelor's degrees in English has been falling, the number in the visual and performing arts has increased substantially.
- Community college students who earn higher grades in humanities and liberal arts courses are more likely to transfer to a four-year college, perform well in humanities and liberal arts courses there, and complete bachelor's degrees than students who earn lower grades.
  - Nationally, 57 percent of students who earn As in community college courses in these fields transfer to a four-year college, compared with 31 percent of students who earn Cs. For each drop in letter grade, the probability of transfer goes down by about a third.
  - Nationally, 77 percent of transfer students who earn As in community college courses in these fields complete bachelor's degrees, compared with 46 percent of students who earn Cs.

Humanities and liberal arts are a vital part of postsecondary education. Coursework in these fields enhances students' skills as writers, communicators and thinkers while providing direct skills for work. Looking at humanities and liberal arts across public higher education reveals that despite program cuts, student debt and the push for STEM, they are holding their own.

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*The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for over 20 years. Our work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.*