

A Foundation and a Fire

Strengthening Humanities Education in Community Colleges

By Selena Cho, Susan Bickerstaff, Daniel Sparks, and Jenny Schanker

The important role that community colleges play in providing humanities education has been largely overlooked. About 40% of undergraduates enroll in community colleges, and about 20% of community college credits earned are in humanities and social science fields (Pippins et al., 2019). Given their large and diverse student populations, we have argued in a prior report that community colleges have the potential to put more students on the path to studying humanities at the bachelor's level and beyond (Bickerstaff et al., 2023). Yet even with improved transfer pathways in humanities disciplines, the majority of community college students who transfer to four-year colleges will pursue other fields; health professions and business, for example, are the most popular majors in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). For community college students who are not pursuing degrees in humanities disciplines, participation in humanities coursework is nonetheless vital. Humanities courses promote creative, adaptable, nuanced thinking, which can help students become engaged citizens and valuable participants in the workforce. Humanities courses help students develop foundational skills that will serve them beyond the community college; they may also light students' fire for learning while in college as they experience opportunities to think critically and collaborate creatively with peers. This is true both for students pursuing credentials considered "academic" and for those in career and technical education (CTE) fields, who may not transfer to four-year colleges (Bailey & Belfield, 2019). As workforce needs and social and political contexts evolve, the skills and dispositions cultivated through the study of the humanities are perhaps more critical than ever.

Participation in humanities coursework is vital for community college students, even those who are not pursuing degrees in humanities disciplines.

In this report, we present findings from research on humanities coursetaking at Michigan community colleges conducted as part of the Strengthening Michigan Humanities (MiHumanities) project, an effort led by the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) and funded by the Mellon Foundation. Our definition of humanities is intentionally broad and includes the arts, cultural studies and anthropology, communication, English language and literature, foreign languages, history, philosophy, literature, religion, and interdisciplinary coursework in the humanities. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data collected in Michigan, we find that while community college students and faculty identify benefits they

associate with participation in humanities coursework, most Michigan community college students take relatively few humanities courses outside of English Composition, and the number of students taking non-composition humanities courses has been declining in recent years. This is likely driven by the demands of their programs of study: The imperative to include career-related content specified by employers or to meet the requirements of transfer partner colleges and universities may crowd out opportunities for free electives, leaving little curricular real estate for subjects like philosophy, poetry, or theater studies. This report explores that tension and articulates a set of recommendations for states, intermediaries, and individual institutions to bolster humanities learning among community college students across all programs of study.

The MiHumanities project began in 2020 with the goal of strengthening transfer pathways in four humanities majors: communication, English, history, and theater. In the design of the project, the MCCA built on previous statewide efforts to support the implementation of guided pathways and to build and strengthen transfer pathways. Michigan's approach to these efforts emphasizes faculty engagement and voluntary agreements, in large measure because the state does not have a centralized higher education system. See Bickerstaff et al. (2023) for a detailed description of the MiHumanities project and recommendations to strengthen humanities transfer pathways.

As part of this project, we analyzed data compiled by the Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC) on students enrolled in the state's 31 public community and tribal colleges to understand the extent to which students enroll in humanities courses and how coursetaking varies by type of program. The data include term-over-term enrollment, coursetaking, and credential completion records for students entering Michigan community colleges between academic years 2009-10 and 2017-18. In addition, we conducted interviews and focus groups with 35 faculty and administrators from 10 community colleges. Faculty participants taught in a wide range of disciplines, including communication, English, history, theater, anthropology, philosophy, world languages, and visual and performing arts. We also conducted focus groups at two community colleges with 13 students who were enrolled in humanities courses in disciplines such as English, communication, philosophy, theater, and world languages. The majority of student participants did not intend to major in the humanities. In the section that follows, we examine how many and what types of humanities courses students complete and how that varies by type of credential that students earn. We also look at program completion outcomes of students who take various kinds of humanities courses. We then present stakeholders' perspectives on the value of humanities coursework as well as challenges and opportunities for improving humanities coursework experiences. We conclude with recommendations for practice.

Patterns in Humanities Coursetaking at Michigan Community Colleges

Michigan community colleges serve over 30,000 first-time-in-college (FTIC) students each year. Roughly 40% of these students ever transfer to a four-year college, 24% ever earn an associate degree, and 15% ever complete a bachelor's degree (Bickerstaff et al., 2023). Half of associate degrees awarded in Michigan are in liberal arts/general studies; the other half are awarded in applied degree programs such as nursing, business, and early childhood education. Within this context, we explore patterns in humanities coursetaking for all community college students in entering cohorts from 2009-10 to 2017-18. We also look more specifically at humanities coursetaking patterns for students in entering cohorts from academic years 2009-10 to 2017-18 who earned certificates, applied associate of science degrees (henceforth AAS), and associate of arts degrees in liberal arts/general studies (henceforth AA), as well as students in entering cohorts from academic years 2009-10 to 2015-16 who earned bachelor's degrees in the humanities or other fields.¹

Table 1 shows the amount of humanities coursetaking by highest credential completed. Eighty-two percent of community college entrants (column 1) completed at least one humanities course at some point during their community college enrollment (row 1). We also compare across various credential programs, including those at the bachelor's level. For example, 89% of AAS degree earners and 95% of AA degree earners completed at least one humanities course. AAS degree earners and students who earned a certificate completed about 4.2 humanities courses on average, slightly fewer than the 5.6 completed by AA degree earners. Students who earned a bachelor's degree in humanities or other fields took fewer humanities courses (4.6 and 3.2 courses, respectively) as compared to AA degree completers, perhaps reflecting fewer terms enrolled at community colleges before transferring. Still, roughly 80% of students who completed a bachelor's degree completed a humanities course prior to transfer (row 1). English, including Composition I & II, accounted for close to 40% of course enrollments within the humanities. When English Composition is excluded, roughly half of community college entrants and credential earners ever completed a humanities course (row 4).

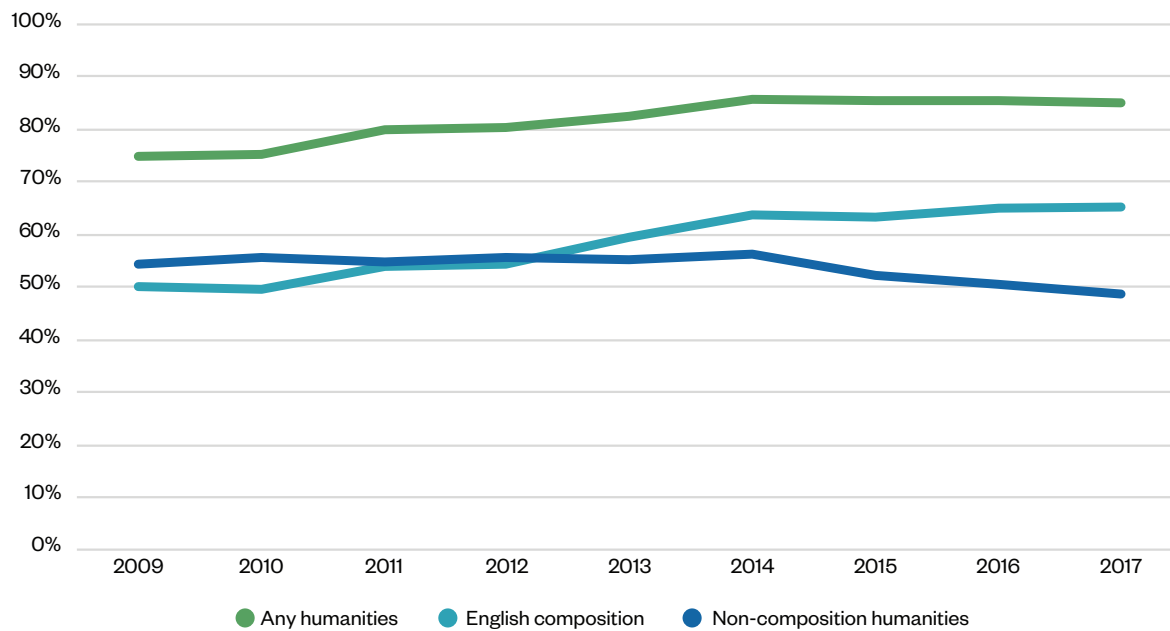
Table 1. Prevalence of Humanities Coursetaking Among Entrants and Credential Completers

Coursetaking Pattern	All Community College Entrants	Certificate Completers	AAS Degree Completers	AA Degree Completers	Non-Humanities Bachelor's Completers	Humanities Bachelor's Completers
Completed at least 1 humanities course	82%	86%	89%	95%	79%	84%
Completed 2 or more humanities courses	56%	75%	78%	90%	67%	72%
Completed 3 or more humanities courses	42%	63%	64%	83%	55%	62%
Completed at least 1 non-composition humanities course	53%	57%	52%	56%	50%	54%
Completed at least 1 transfer-eligible humanities course	42%	58%	63%	68%	53%	55%
Number of humanities courses completed (standard deviation)	2.70 (3.17)	4.18 (4.03)	4.23 (4.26)	5.61 (3.78)	3.22 (2.86)	4.58 (4.55)
Observations	286,599	18,148	28,002	26,456	20,039	3,345

Note. Limited to FTIC cohorts from 2009-10 to 2017-18 for all groups except bachelor's completers, which is limited to FTIC cohorts from 2009-10 to 2015-16. All row variables refer to humanities courses completed while enrolled at a community college.

It may be useful to consider humanities coursetaking by cohorts over time and to isolate English Composition in analyses about humanities coursework, as the course, which focuses on rhetorical strategies used in written communication, can be taught using a range of content (for example, news articles about current events) that may or may not connect to the humanities. Figure 1 presents trends in humanities course completion rates by cohort. It shows that while the proportion of students completing English Composition has increased modestly over time, the proportion of students completing other humanities coursework has fallen modestly in recent years.² From 2014 to 2017, a rough equivalent of 2,500 fewer students completed humanities courses outside of English Composition. The most frequently taken humanities courses outside of English Composition included Interpersonal Communication, The Fundamentals of Public Speaking, Music Appreciation, and Art Appreciation, each of which typically satisfies general education requirements for most degree programs across Michigan community colleges.

Figure 1. Trends in Humanities Course Completion Rates



Note. Course completion rates are for all community college entrants in entry cohorts 2009-10 through 2017-18; they show whether students completed at least one course while enrolled. “Any humanities” includes English composition courses, whereas “Non-composition humanities” excludes English composition courses.

In row 5 of Table 1, we identify completion of transfer-eligible humanities courses. These are courses that fulfill the disciplinary categories of the Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA), a set of core courses that satisfy general education requirements at institutions across Michigan. The MTA includes courses in English composition, communication, and other topics ranging from public speaking and world religions to philosophy and foreign languages. We flagged over 1,500 transfer-eligible course offerings in English, communication, the arts, and other humanities disciplines across all public Michigan community colleges. Sixty-three percent and 68% of AAS and AA degree completers, respectively, completed a transfer-eligible humanities course, with English Composition being the most common.

In addition to exploring basic humanities coursetaking patterns, we use descriptive regression analysis to understand how humanities coursetaking correlates with credential completion outcomes, including whether a student completed a certificate, AAS degree, AA degree, bachelor's degree in the humanities, or other bachelor's degree. To do so, we use an ordinary least squares (OLS) model that controls for student demographic characteristics, first-year and overall credits attempted and earned, year-one persistence, and entry-cohort and college fixed effects. We also vary the coefficient of interest so we can observe the importance of completing English Composition versus other humanities coursework and whether the humanities course completed is transfer eligible (i.e., included in the MTA). We cannot completely control for student selection into humanities courses, so these results should not be interpreted causally. Additionally, these results are limited in that they focus only on certificate and degree completion as the outcome. Still, this analysis helps to unpack the relationship between humanities coursetaking and program completion, and several takeaways emerge from coefficient estimates presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Regression Results on Credential Completion by Humanities Coursetaking

Variable	Certificate Completion	AAS Degree Completion	AA Degree Completion	Non-Humanities Bachelor's Completion	Humanities Bachelor's Completion
Completed English Composition	.019*** (.006)	.042*** (.006)	.064*** (.006)	-.004 (.006)	.004*** (.001)
Completed transfer-eligible humanities course	.035** (.015)	.058*** (.008)	.075*** (.010)	.018*** (.004)	.009*** (.001)
Completed non-composition, transfer-eligible humanities course	.056** (.026)	.054*** (.012)	.058*** (.015)	.023*** (.006)	.006*** (.001)
Completed non-transfer-eligible humanities course	-.031*** (.011)	-.035*** (.006)	-.034*** (.011)	-.036*** (.004)	-.007*** (.001)
Completed non-composition, non-transfer-eligible humanities course	-.040*** (.013)	-.047*** (.007)	-.042*** (.006)	-.034*** (.004)	-.005*** (.001)
Observations	285,290	285,290	285,290	213,107	213,107

Note. Limited to 2009–2017 FTIC cohorts for all groups besides bachelor's completers, which is limited to 2009–2015 FTIC cohorts.

Demographic controls include race/ethnicity, gender, Pell Grant receipt, and in-district status. Academic momentum controls include total credits earned and attempted at a community college, first-term and year-credit indicators (e.g., completed 12 or more credits in a student's first semester), and year-one persistence. The OLS model also controls for cohort and college fixed effects. Standard errors are in parentheses. "Completed" variables are binary indicators that refer to whether a student completed 1 or more of the specified courses.

*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01.

First, completing English Composition is associated with a greater likelihood of degree and certificate completion (Table 2, row 1), which aligns with prior findings on academic momentum (Belfield et al., 2019). Similarly, students who completed transfer-eligible humanities courses both inclusive and exclusive of English Composition were more likely to earn certificates and degrees (rows 2 and 3). Students who completed a transfer-eligible humanities course were 6 to 8 percentage points more likely to complete an AAS or AA degree, respectively, and 1 to 2 percentage points more likely to complete a bachelor's degree. Additional analysis, provided in Table A1 in the Appendix, presents marginal effects. It shows that each additional transfer-eligible course a student completes is associated with an increased likelihood of program completion across credential categories, especially for AA degree completion, where the associated increase is 2 percentage points for each humanities course and 4 percentage points for each transfer-eligible course completed.

In contrast, students who completed non-transfer-eligible humanities courses were less likely to earn certificates and degrees (Table 2, rows 4 and 5). For instance, students who completed a humanities course outside of English Composition and not flagged as transfer eligible were 4 to 5 percentage points less likely to complete a certificate or associate degree and 1 to 3 percentage points less likely to complete a bachelor's degree. Students who completed humanities courses, including composition courses, not identified as transfer eligible were similarly 1 to 4 percentage points less likely to earn a certificate or degree.

These mixed results highlight the importance of better understanding the types of humanities courses students take and the extent to which such coursetaking helps students complete their certificates and degrees. Non-transfer-eligible humanities courses may impart important foundational skills to students and help light their fire for learning, but they do not appear to correlate with credential completion. Students who complete courses that do not confer credit in their certificate or degree programs may be at a disadvantage; this highlights the need for adequate advising about which humanities courses students should enroll in to advance toward their academic goals. This is not to say that student exposure to the humanities should necessarily be limited to transfer-eligible courses; rather, institutions should work to ensure that students understand how the courses they are interested in can support their academic path. Additional resources and advising supports may further enhance the quality of humanities courses and help more students gain access to the kind of light-the-fire experiences that make deep engagement with the humanities so valuable.

Perspectives on the Value of the Humanities

In this section, we draw on interview data from students, faculty members, and administrators at Michigan community colleges to examine how they describe the value of humanities coursework, not just for the students who plan to major in the humanities but also for those in programs of study outside of the humanities. Interviewees often spoke about humanities coursework as fundamental for creative engagement and for acknowledging and exploring the complexity of the human condition. In the words of one faculty member,

I hope that we can help people coming into college [to] see the humanities as ... something that is part of all of us. It's part of what we do even without training. We create, we just make stuff—it's what we do.

—Faculty member

Some reported that the role and value of the humanities took on greater importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees noted that the humanities offered people a creative escape, comfort, and hope during a globally stressful and dire time:

And if anybody ever asked me why we need to study the humanities, in the last year and a half, all I've been able to do is go, "Look around. This is why." What are you running to while you're stuck in your basement? You're running to art. You're running to music. You're running to story to escape. Humanities is important. It is what makes us human.

—Administrator

More concretely, interviewees highlighted that humanities study builds foundational skills and dispositions that are valuable to fields and careers both inside and outside of the humanities. These include skills like writing, communication, and critical thinking, but also a set of perhaps more intangible attributes like open-mindedness and empathy. Humanities courses foster these skills and dispositions by encouraging students to engage with ideas, perspectives, and peers that may be unfamiliar to them. Thus, humanities courses serve as a kind of academic footing for engagement with all sorts of novel content that will serve them throughout their time in college and beyond. One student described their experience in a humanities course in this way:

There's always debate in class, which I love. And [the instructor] does not shy away from bringing up politics or current events also. He says his job is to teach us how to be open-minded and willing to listen before responding. And that is something I really need to work on.

—Student (enrolled in a human services/social work program)

One faculty member shared how an African American literature course helps students to engage with complex, nuanced, and sometimes challenging topics and materials alongside diverse peers:

People get an opportunity to work with content that's very emotionally alive and very charged, with people who are the same as them and different from them in a gazillion ways. Because I have 60-year-old people in my classes and 16-year-old people, and we have people who are coming from every possible slice of socioeconomic life, every gender identification, every racial identity, every ethnicity. ... And they report consistently how much they value ... the opportunity to have challenging conversations together.

—Faculty member

Others similarly pointed to the value of exposing students to new and different histories, cultures, philosophies, and ways of thinking. Both faculty and students described how humanities courses help students make connections between disparate ideas:

It opens up your mind to different theories and concepts of ways of people, how they could be thinking. So maybe if you're communicating with someone, you get a different view of how they could be thinking, or you learn to connect dots more. I'm really starting to get more out of life just by taking this course.

—Student (enrolled in a communication program)

Additionally, interviewees reported that humanities study fosters experimentation, creativity, and resilience, encouraging students to try, revise, and try again. In the words of one theater faculty member,

I think theater has so much to offer in soft skills and offers a space that I think cuts against a lot of the sort of pre-professional tack of most of academia right now. To me the central thing is, it is an art form that is predicated on doing something over and over again and constantly getting it a little bit wrong, and just having to kind of figure out how to try new

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things. And I have the privilege of teaching a form that encourages experimentation with the expectation that things will not go the way you plan.

—Faculty member

In addition to developing foundational competencies, interviewees suggested that humanities courses can help students feel excited and motivated about their college experience. Faculty members highlighted that because many humanities courses focus on building connections across disciplines and across time periods, places, and peoples, students, regardless of their field of study, can find space to explore their interests and passions more meaningfully. Thus, humanities courses can encourage a desire for learning by giving students opportunities to engage with their interests and passions in an academic setting:

I feel like a lot of students take those English courses initially because they're required, and then they sometimes get to meet parts of themselves that they haven't had an opportunity to meet before. ... I think a lot of students find that exciting.

—Faculty member

The instructors were very good at tying things into the real world and current events that are going on today. And so, we had some really good class discussions, and I find that super interesting because I'm also interested in activism and advocacy work.

—Student (enrolled in a social work program)

Given the high rates of attrition in community colleges, these types of learning opportunities that excite and engage students and allow them to make connections to interests inside and outside their field of study may be particularly valuable for capturing students' interest and motivating them to stay in college.

Challenges and Opportunities in Humanities Classrooms

As the discussion above shows, humanities courses have the potential to offer students many benefits. At the same time, interviewees frequently pointed to challenges in teaching humanities at the community college, and they likewise noted opportunities for improvement at the classroom level.

One challenge is that students bring with them their prior educational experiences and some preconceived ideas about the humanities, which may limit their interest and learning. For some students, negative experiences with humanities courses in high school may result in indifference, apprehension, or aversion toward humanities courses in college:

A lot of students come to us and say they hate history because of their high school experience. And I always tell them, "I did too." I came out of high school and did not like history because I thought American history was boring as dirt. It was multiple choice, and I was tired of hearing about the same three wars.

—Faculty member

Community college humanities faculty members often face the daunting task of trying to capture the interest of students who are already negatively predisposed toward their course. However, this challenge also presents an opportunity to reframe what humanities study is and can be. Both faculty members and students noted that though students sometimes begin a humanities course with a negative feeling about it, a well-taught humanities course can engage and excite students in a way that is refreshing and different from students' high school experiences:

[Students] don't come into my classes with the predisposition of wanting to be there. ... They're there because they have to be, and then they discover it's exciting and that there are interesting questions, and [they start] making connections.

— Faculty member

I'm also taking a Shakespeare class, and all through high school I did not like Shakespeare whatsoever. So, taking this course has helped me get a better understanding and appreciation for it. ... My Shakespeare professor, every week, he'll send out a YouTube video or something that relates to Shakespeare, but not in conventional ways. So, it's just more fun, like aspects of Shakespeare that you're not commonly taught in high school.

— Student (intending to enroll in an English secondary education program)

Some students have not been previously asked or expected to do the type of thinking and learning that is prioritized in humanities coursework.

Faculty also reported that some students arrive at college with preconceived ideas about themselves as learners that influence their humanities experiences. Faculty members noted that some students have not been previously asked or expected to do the type of thinking and learning that is prioritized in humanities coursework. Humanities scholarship emphasizes critical thinking, argumentation, and creativity. Faculty members shared that students sometimes come into humanities courses not expecting or prepared to do this kind of intellectual and academic work because prior education emphasized rote memorization and regurgitation. In the words of one faculty member,

Most of the students who enroll at community colleges have not been positioned or addressed or treated like they make knowledge, like they make new ideas. They have typically been positioned as people who receive ideas: people who we can put information into rather than asking them to develop new concepts on their own. And asking them or expecting them or trying to have them make those new ideas can be really challenging. So, when they write their first research paper ... they're like, "Well, this is what [the literature] said." And I'm like, "Yeah, so? I could have done that, so tell me something interesting. What should I do with it? Nuance it. Give me, how are you moving the knowledge forward?"

— Faculty member

This challenge presents an opportunity for instructors to help students reframe their capabilities as those of competent and active creators of knowledge rather than passive receivers of knowledge.

As noted above, most students who enroll in humanities courses at community colleges are not intending to major in humanities at the four-year level and are instead fulfilling

general education requirements. Again, this adds to the burden on humanities faculty members at community colleges to design and teach their courses in ways that are relevant and interesting to students specializing in other disciplines. Often, community college humanities instructors try to highlight ways of thinking, questioning, and analyzing that are applicable across disciplines:

In terms of things like the Introduction to Anthropology course, we teach that very differently, I think, than if we were at some place like University of Michigan that has an anthropology major and where you would have students who are specifically going into that field. One of the things that we talk about is how to make these things relevant to their lives now, because the odds are good that they're not going to go into anthropology. So, how do we make an anthropological perspective something that's important for them to have?

—Faculty member

The intro courses, for me, are also a place to challenge preconceptions about theater. There are learning objectives that we want them to walk out with, a certain sense of terminology and an awareness of how theater works, but I think that's also a space where I'm much more open to and receptive of questions about, "Do we have to do things this way?" ... That class is very much about throwing a lot of breadcrumbs out, with a few things that they do need to walk away being able to talk about as human beings.

—Faculty member

This challenge also presents an opportunity for community college humanities instructors to use engaging and relevant curriculum and pedagogical practices in order to capture students' interest.

Many interviewees reported that faculty are actively working to enhance the humanities curriculum by making it more diverse, inclusive, and social justice oriented. Humanities curriculum has historically been dominated by content made by wealthy, English-speaking White men, which can be uninviting and alienating for female students, students of color, and lower income students. One administrator drew a connection between diverse and inclusive curriculum and students' persistence and success in college more broadly:

If we look at the [U.S. history course] curriculum, we spend, in a 15-week class, about 14 weeks talking about old White men in politics, right? It's not really a survey of U.S. history at all. So, I think there's an opportunity from an equity lens and an access lens to look at all of our curriculum and [ask ourselves], "What are the resources that we're using within our curriculum?" I guess really looking at the competencies, what do we need students to know and be able to do? And what are the resources then that we can use to help them get there? That they might be more engaged and that they can recognize themselves in and potentially stay in school?

—Administrator

Community college humanities instructors seek ways of thinking, questioning, and analyzing that are applicable across disciplines.

A theater professor shared an anecdote about why a diverse, inclusive curriculum is important. He dedicates one class in his introductory theater course to scattering physical copies of various plays around the theater, written by people and portraying characters of all walks of life. Students then get to “pick up plays, flip through them, and see if anything in the language catches them.” He shared,

Part of it's about whose stories they think can get told. ... Whenever students have found August Wilson plays or Suzan-Lori Parks plays or plays where people are speaking in a vernacular that is closer to what the student's own vernacular is, or characters whose cultural backgrounds match theirs, there are always a couple of students who just have not encountered plays that do that before. ... Some of it is about what theater can do aesthetically, but it's also literally that theater is being made by all kinds of people for all kinds of purposes. I think that's a big part of the kind of broadening [of theater] that I'm looking for.

—Faculty member

When the curriculum does center diverse writers, thinkers, and cultures, students appreciate it. One student intending to enroll in an English secondary education program drew a contrast between the more diverse content in her college English course and the content in her high school English course:

I feel like with African American literature specifically, I feel like that's not really touched on through, like, high school English other than, like, Black History Month. So, I wanted to go more in depth and learn more about Black authors. ... I just feel like Black literature wasn't really something I was exposed to.

—Student

Resource Constraints as Barriers to Improvement

Humanities faculty strive to meet the learning needs of diverse students who bring a range of interests and prior experiences to their community college humanities courses. Addressing the challenges in doing so, described in the prior section, requires investment in curriculum and teaching. Yet interviewees consistently reported that limited resources and small departments hinder this work. In addition, humanities departments struggle to enroll courses that do not fulfill general education requirements, which exacerbates underinvestment in the humanities.

Community colleges rely heavily on part-time faculty to teach the bulk of their humanities courses, and a college often has only one or two full-time faculty members in any given humanities discipline. The few full-time faculty members then have little time to embark on major initiatives. Interviewees often described this circumstance as a barrier to making curriculum and instruction more inclusive:

I think almost all of the questions that you're asking also butt up against some other institutional and labor conditions that are a part of two-year

college work. So, deliberation, deep conversations about who we are and how we're positioning our students and what we're doing for inclusion require time. They're uncomfortable conversations, they're slow conversations. They need to be deliberative, and they need to allow for time for people to sit with ideas and trust one another enough to be wrong together, in order to get where they're going. And that time is simply not—it's just not possible when people are teaching five courses a semester; one needs an abundance of time for that.

— Faculty member

A faculty member echoed these ideas and also highlighted the added burden this places on faculty members of color, who are in the minority at most community colleges:

Almost 40% of all of our courses or credit hours are taught by part-time faculty. ... And I say that just because ... when [students] are having issues, it comes down to who's teaching them. And if it's an adjunct, one of the things I always do is I try to figure out, you know, how many places is this adjunct working? Has my part-time faculty colleague had time to take any of these great offerings and trainings that we have in order to teach better in the classroom? So, I really think the biggest threat to issues of equity and inclusion is the faculty member. And then, not just the faculty but the institution and how it prepares faculty for the work that they have to do, often not noticing the additional responsibility that, speaking specifically for myself, faculty who look like me take on. And, you know, not just for my students but for other faculty.

—Faculty member

While the challenge of limited faculty time is not unique to humanities departments, many faculty members and administrators reported that humanities departments are particularly vulnerable to declining student enrollment. Given that many humanities departments do not have strong discipline-specific transfer pathways, it is difficult to maintain enrollment in courses that do not fulfill general education requirements. One administrator explained,

[Students] might [explore] if they have elective room in their schedule, but the reality at a community college is you've got two years, and you're trying to fit in all of the gen eds over two years because that's what the four-years are expecting. ... So, unless you have majors or people who are adamant that they want to take those [courses], or you have somebody who is wealthy enough that they can afford to take courses that aren't covered under their financial aid, which is not usually the case at a community college, then it makes it tough to maintain those [humanities] programs.

—Administrator

As enrollments shrink, departments face the threat of consolidation and faculty reduction. Courses that tend to be offered as electives are often popular among faculty, so the loss of these courses has implications for faculty retention. Some administrators we spoke with bemoaned the circular consequences of waning student enrollment for a department's ability not only to invest in course quality but also to strengthen programs of study, build

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transfer pathways, and offer discipline-specific mentoring and co-curricular activities (see also Bickerstaff et al., 2023).

Many students we interviewed would have liked to take more humanities courses. One student lamented how her program plan prevented her from taking more history courses after her first one captured her interest:

I've wanted to take other diverse history courses, but it's not within my [pre-nursing] program. So, if I want to take any of those classes ... I would have to take it in excess to those [pre-nursing] classes I need. And also, in addition to that, it would not be covered by financial aid. ... I would have to pay out of pocket if it's not in my area of study, which sucks. ... I get why it's not in your course of study; they want to save you money and everything. But other courses can be beneficial within the healthcare fields.

—Student (enrolled in nursing program)

The previous research report from this project (Bickerstaff et al., 2023) argues that more coherent pathways to transfer in the humanities create opportunities to recruit students into further humanities study. This may be one strategy to boost enrollments. However, given that most community college students do not plan to major in the humanities, community colleges should look to additional strategies to capitalize on the potential of humanities courses to engage and excite students about college and to confer the essential skills and dispositions students will need regardless of their specific education and career goals.

Discussion and Recommendations: Creating a More Robust and Coherent Humanities Education Experience for Community College Students

Students, faculty, and administrators in our study pointed to a range of potential benefits to studying the humanities at community colleges, including greater self-knowledge, an increased ability to connect deeply with others, and a renewed capacity for original and creative thought. Most interviewees reported that these benefits were important for students, whether they are pursuing a program considered academic or one in a career and technical field. As the authors of this study, we share the view that the humanities yield valuable benefits for all students. We approached this study as individuals who have taken humanities courses and benefited from them, and throughout the study we were interested in helping community colleges strengthen their humanities programs. We contend that the next generation of teachers, engineering technologists, nurses, respiratory therapists, welders, and automotive technicians can benefit from the foundation and fire for learning offered by humanities courses.

But despite the benefits and value of humanities study, to suggest that all students should take more humanities coursework is unpragmatic and unproductive. Streamlined program pathways to promote completion make it challenging for colleges to simply increase the number of humanities courses students are able

to take within a program of study. The demands of students' programs of study often crowd out opportunities for free electives, leaving little space for subjects like philosophy, poetry, or theater studies. It therefore becomes important for community colleges to make the most of the opportunities that students do have to encounter the humanities. To avoid perpetuating the vicious circle of low enrollment, reduced funding, and course and program elimination, colleges should implement strategies that visibly position critical thinking, argumentation, and creativity as central to the student experience, regardless of intended course of study. In this section, we offer ideas on how community colleges can strengthen humanities offerings to benefit all students.

Although the vast majority of students across all for-credit programs of study take a humanities course while enrolled at a community college, English Composition accounts for a substantial portion of this. Students completing an associate degree or higher typically complete somewhere between three and six humanities courses during their community college experience, with a wide variance depending on whether the student is pursuing an applied or an academic degree. About half of students take a humanities course outside of English composition. We find that, across credential types, students who take transfer-eligible humanities courses are modestly more likely to complete their programs. And we find that completing humanities courses that are not transfer eligible is associated with modestly lower program completion across credential types. These findings underscore the importance of ensuring—through robust advising practices and opportunities for academic and career pathways exploration—that students have a clear understanding of how humanities courses fit into their educational program trajectory and how taking such courses moves them toward credential completion.

One way that colleges can enrich students' encounters with the humanities is to allow a more diverse array of humanities courses to satisfy both general education/transfer requirements and credential-specific requirements in a variety of fields, by analyzing and augmenting course learning outcomes. For example, though studio arts courses are typically not transfer eligible, one Michigan community college has made its foundational acting courses transfer eligible by tweaking the curriculum. Faculty members have included more writing assignments in these courses and added textual analysis to the public speaking and performance skills developed in them. This small change in course content allows these courses to satisfy the college's general education requirements and also enables the college to include acting on its list of transfer-eligible courses, those that are accepted as part of the state's general education core defined by the Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA).

Another way that colleges can enrich students' experiences with the humanities is to ensure that humanities-based pedagogical approaches are embedded into courses that are already part of the curriculum. Composition and communication are two humanities areas that focus on developing rhetorical skills for writing and speaking without focusing on defined bodies of content. Often required in associate degree and certificate programs, courses in these areas can include assignments intended to encourage the deeper thinking and exploration of students' personal passions, a key potential benefit of humanities study. For example, composition courses

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can provide students opportunities to read academically and write reflectively or argumentatively about their hobbies and interests outside of school—sports, politics, movies, etc. Even in non-humanities courses, engaging students in experiential learning along with reflective writing can tap into their creativity and foster original thinking and authentic interactions with their peers and the larger community. Thus, embedding more humanities-based pedagogical approaches in both humanities and non-humanities courses can create more opportunities for rich benefits, which can encourage students’ desire to learn and perhaps contribute to students’ persistence through college.

Innovations in individual courses can be a starting point, but colleges may also want to consider a broad transformation in students’ experience with the humanities across the span of their college careers. For example, in high-enrollment programs, faculty might be able to curate a set of general education courses, including humanities courses, that are particularly relevant to that field of study and therefore perhaps more interesting to students in those fields. Customized courses within humanities areas that explore content like the history of manufacturing technology, literature about nursing, or works of art about public health issues could enrich students’ learning by integrating program-relevant content with humanities competencies.

Applied associate degree and certificate programs could benefit from a comprehensive review of the curriculum to determine where humanities content and competencies could be infused across the pathway. This could involve adding the written and verbal communication, text and image analysis, and interpersonal connection and reflection assignments characteristic of humanities courses to selected discipline-specific courses, or integrating co-curricular learning experiences that foster flexible thinking and problem-solving. This approach would require faculty to collaborate across disciplines to design assignments. Approaches such as linking courses in learning communities or team teaching would enhance this strategy.

These and other potential innovations may look less like traditional humanities courses, but today, with artificial intelligence engines already creating artwork and writing essays, it is perhaps time for institutions to view humanities studies less as a discrete set of courses in various subfields and more as a collaborative exploration of that which makes us human, through competencies such as creative thinking, critical analysis and argumentation, and collaboration. To ensure a robust and coherent humanities education experience for all students, community colleges (supported by funders, intermediaries, and state and federal higher education agencies) must create enabling conditions for exploration and innovation within and across institutions. The following recommendations provide a potential supportive framework for this new frontier for humanities study in community colleges:

- **Recommendation 1. Partnerships between funders, states, and intermediaries should foster opportunities for faculty from humanities and other disciplines to collaborate on curricular and instructional improvements.** To accomplish this goal, colleges need to explore creative ways to allow space and time for the difficult and deliberative conversations that will be needed to incubate strategies that transform students’ experiences with the humanities.

- **Recommendation 2. Community colleges should include steps to strengthen the definition and role of general education, including the humanities, as central to the institution's core mission.** Most students encounter the humanities through their general education requirements. Completion of these transfer-eligible courses positively correlates with degree completion. Thus, with support from intermediaries, colleges should invest in general education as part of the college's strategic plan. This may include reviewing humanities course offerings, program requirements, and curricular and co-curricular learning outcomes.
- **Recommendation 3. Community college faculty and administrators should ensure that the skills and attributes fostered in humanities coursework are considered in the process of reviewing pathways across all programs of study.** Research shows that humanities study builds foundational skills that are valuable to fields and careers both inside and outside of humanities disciplines. The development of competencies such as critical thinking, argumentation, collaboration, and creativity should be considered as colleges reform strategies about recommended courses that may apply across multiple programs of study.

Humanities courses promote nuanced, adaptable thinking that can help students become informed and engaged citizens and valuable participants in our economy. As workforce needs and the shared social circumstances in communities and our nation evolve, the skills and dispositions cultivated through the study of the humanities are perhaps more critical than ever. Creating a supportive framework for ensuring that community college students have opportunities to experience the benefits of the humanities, regardless of their selected program of study, will require additional investments and effort. Funders, intermediaries, states, the business community, and institutional actors can all play a role. The constraints are significant, but the potential benefits are real and compelling.

Endnotes

1. We use information from the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Career and Technical Education to define applied associate degrees (AAS), which include, for instance, associate in applied science degrees in fields such as manufacturing and information technology as well as associate of arts degrees in education and other programs flagged as applied. See Michigan Department of Education, Office of Career and Technical Education (n.d.) for a full list of applied degrees. Associate of arts degrees (AA) refer specifically to students who received associate degrees in liberal arts/general studies.
2. To further explore differences in humanities coursetaking by credential type, we use the Carnegie Classification of Associate's Colleges to disaggregate institutions by the types of credentials they confer and the proportion of students who go on to transfer to a four-year college or pursue career and technical education (CTE) associate degrees (not shown in tables or figures). Within this classification, community colleges are flagged as CTE if more than 50% of students receive awards (degrees and certificates) in CTE disciplines. A third of Michigan community colleges are flagged as transfer oriented, whereas the other two thirds are oriented toward CTE awards. The proportion of students completing humanities coursework is nearly identical for community colleges in Michigan identified as CTE versus transfer oriented. Similar to the overall trend shown in Figure 1, the percentage of students at both CTE and transfer-oriented community colleges completing English Composition has increased since 2010 to over 80%, while the percentage of students completing non-composition courses has declined to below 50%.

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Appendix

Table A1. Regression Results: Marginal Effects of Humanities Coursetaking on Credential Completion

Variable	Certificate Completion	AAS Degree Completion	AA Degree Completion	Non-Humanities Bachelor's Completion	Humanities Bachelor's Completion
Each humanities course completed	.005** (.002)	.007*** (.002)	.022*** (.002)	-.004*** (.000)	.004** (.000)
Each non-composition humanities course completed	.003** (.001)	.006*** (.002)	.021*** (.002)	-.006*** (.000)	.005*** (.000)
Each transfer-eligible humanities course completed	.005 (.004)	.008*** (.002)	.039*** (.004)	.007*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)
Observations	285,290	285,290	285,290	213,107	213,107

Note. Limited to FTIC cohorts from 2009-10 to 2017-18 for all groups except bachelor's completers, which is limited to FTIC cohorts from 2009-10 to 2015-16. Demographic controls include race/ethnicity, gender, Pell Grant receipt, and in-district status. Academic momentum controls include total credits earned and attempted at a community college, first-term and year-credit indicators (e.g., completed 12 or more credits in a student's first semester), and year-one persistence. The OLS model also controls for cohort and college fixed effects. Standard errors are in parentheses. "Each humanities courses completed," "Each non-composition humanities course completed," and "Each transfer-eligible humanities courses completed" are continuous variables that reflect the marginal apparent impact of taking an additional humanities, non-composition humanities, or transfer-eligible humanities course, respectively.

*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01.

