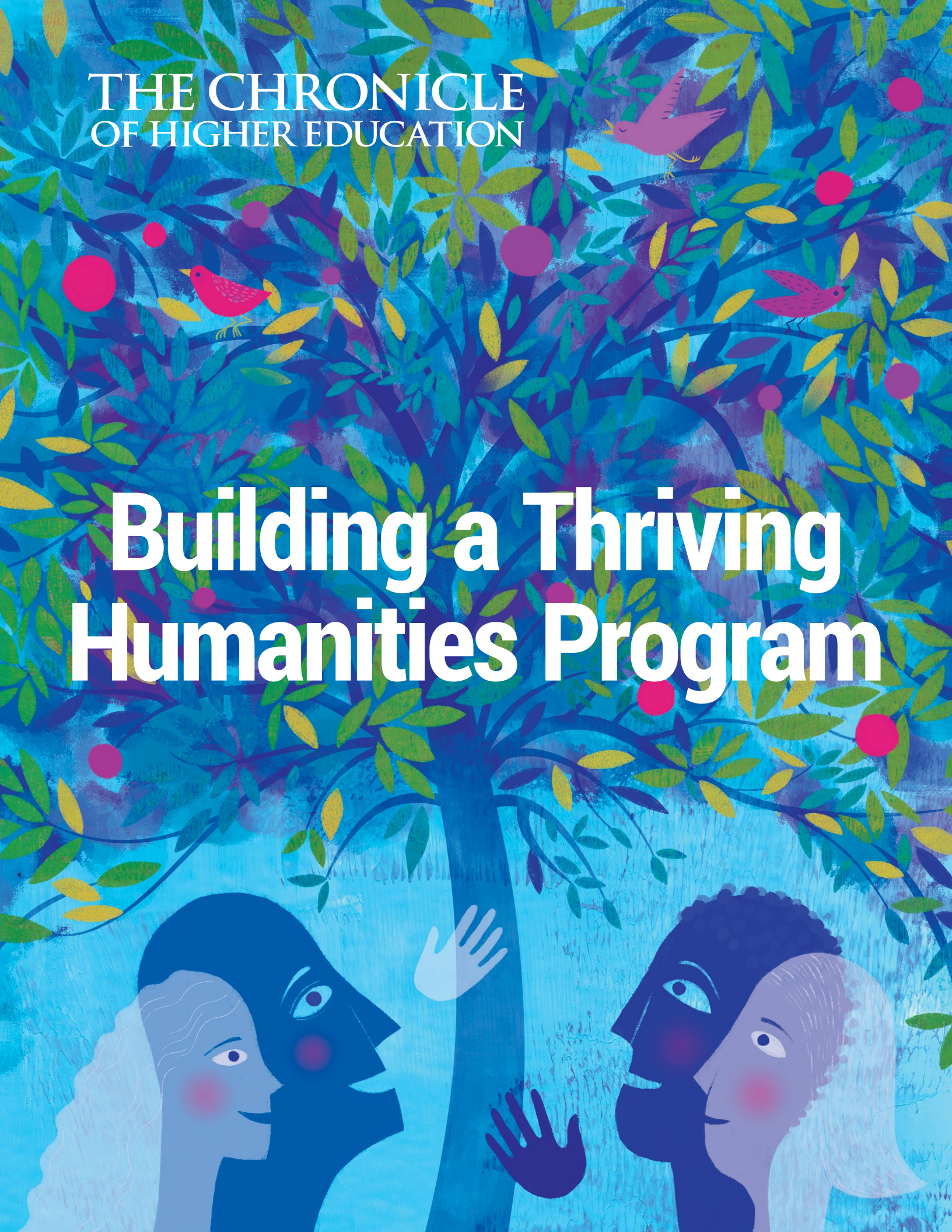
THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Building a Thriving Humanities Program



Illustrations by Joyce Hesselberth for *The Chronicle*

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Introduction

FRANKENSTEIN and *Freakanomics*. Homer's *Odyssey* and career coaching.

As colleges and scholarly associations try to understand the best ways to attract students to the humanities, these kinds of juxtapositions are becoming more familiar. The goal is not to abandon classical texts but to make the major more interdisciplinary, more relevant to today's students, and more explicitly tied to skills valued in the 21st-century job market.

The gloomy news about the humanities is no secret. Since 2012, the share of college students majoring in humanities fields has dropped by about a third. Since 2018, the number of institutions awarding degrees in almost every humanities discipline has decreased.

Less well-known is the array of initiatives colleges are undertaking to woo students of all interests and backgrounds to the humanities — and the success they have had. To name just two examples: Arizona State University has seen a 30-percent rise in humanities majors since 2016. The University of California at Berkeley has seen an increase of 32 percent since 2020.

And that doesn't include reported growth in humanities minors.

This report looks behind the statistics to highlight some of these programs: How they developed, what choices leaders made — and why — and the resistance they overcame. *The Chronicle* interviewed about 50 people, including faculty members, deans, analysts, and students, to help readers understand how the humanities are evolving in undergraduate education.

The story begins with facing some hard truths: Many students not only have little understanding of what the humanities encompass, they don't even know what the word means.

"We were simply not using the right language, and we were not reaching the audiences that needed to be reached in order to change the story about the humanities," says Christine Henseler, co-founder of the Center for Humanities Communication and a professor of Spanish and Hispanic studies at Union College in New York.

Reaching that audience requires explaining, on websites and in other material, what the humanities are, how they can allow students to follow their interests and passions, and

also how they can get a job with a degree in English or art history.

Some people in and outside of higher education fear efforts to connect the humanities so strongly to career goals will ultimately dilute the field's value. But increasingly those who teach in the humanities understand that, in order to attract students, a love of literature or French can and must be paired with an understanding of how it is valued on the job market.

Jayashree Kamblé, a professor of English who teaches a career-preparation seminar to liberal-arts majors at LaGuardia Community College, in New York, says her students are already interested in some form of creative writing, literary studies, or journalism. But they need to understand where that can lead in the future.

"I often tell them, It seems like you're here because you love this. Let me also give you some ways to tackle when people will challenge you about what the career opportunities are for people with this major," she says. "What I'm doing is giving them the language and the spiel that they can use" to defend their choice to family and friends.

Of course, the solution isn't only a matter of finding the right marketing tools or even connecting humanities to career competencies; it also requires understanding what students want and need in today's educational environment. In the best of all worlds, that means ensuring the curriculum is accessible yet challenging and meaningful, creating interdisciplinary majors and minors that bring together humanities and other fields, and incorporating community projects and internship programs.

Humanities courses should enrich all students' lives, regardless of their major.

"Our concentrated effort to increase enrollment — that's not the end goal for us," says Maggie Aziz, associate dean for academic and student affairs and a professor of sociology at the University of South Carolina at Union. "The end goal for us is that our students are exposed to the humanities early and often."

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See more of her work at alinatugend.com.

SECTION 1

Understanding the Challenge

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, supporters of the humanities in higher education have been in something of a defensive crouch. Despite research showing that humanities majors have earnings comparable to those of graduates in most other fields outside STEM, the public often views a degree in English, philosophy, or art history as increasingly irrelevant in the digital age — a luxury that debt-ridden students can no longer afford.

There's a reason words like "doomed" and "death" are liberally sprinkled through discussions of the topic. While many majors have declined since 2012, those in the humanities have been by far the hardest hit: The share of college students who majored in humanities at four-year colleges has dropped by about a third — from 13.1 percent to 8.8 percent, according to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

"We have lived in an environment for as long as I can remember where the narrative is one of crisis," says Sara Guyer, dean of the division of arts and humanities and a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley.

A number of institutions, from community colleges to the Ivy League, are fighting to bring students back to the humanities. They're doing this by crossing disciplines to create new majors and minors, transforming general-education courses, and more concretely tying the humanities to job skills and careers.

TAKEAWAYS

- Enrollments in humanities programs tend to fluctuate with the economy but have trended stubbornly downward in recent years.
- Both financial and cultural forces are at play.
- Looking only at the number of majors risks missing other signs of interest in the humanities.
- Colleges are increasingly willing to restructure humanities programs to draw more students.

While it's too soon to document the effects of those initiatives, many observers see the beginnings of a shift.

"If you look at the data, I think comeback is too strong a word," says Paula M. Krebs, executive director of the Modern Language Association. "If you look at the energy, I don't think it's too strong."

A HISTORY OF FLUCTUATIONS

Handwringing over the state of the humanities has a long history. Enrollment tends to fluctuate with the economy — when times are good, people are more likely to feel comfortable majoring in disciplines less clearly tied to vocational outcomes.

"The humanities and social sciences are not merely elective, nor are they elite or elitist."

Beginning in the mid-1950s with postwar economic stability and the expansion of higher education, the number of humanities bachelor's degrees grew in what are considered "historical categories": classical studies, English language and literature, history, languages and literatures other than English, linguistics, and philosophy.

But the high inflation and uneven economic growth that began in the 1970s sent that number plummeting from 136,213 degrees conferred in 1971 to less than half that in 1984. The figures swung up and down over the next couple of decades and by 2012 were close to the 1971 peak.

Then the bottom fell out.

"Basically from 2012 is pretty much when every discipline started to see a drop," says Robert B. Townsend, who oversees humanities, arts, and culture programs for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, one of the few agencies to track statistics in this area. "And the fact that that's exactly four years after the beginning of the Great Recession I don't think is a coincidence." After all, those graduating in 2012 were entering college just as the economy was falling apart.

"We've been dealing with a very long hangover from the 2008 financial crisis," says Scott Muir, director of undergraduate initiatives at the National Humanities Alliance. Enrollments in almost all humanities majors have declined, but not at the same pace. Traditional majors such as English and philosophy have been harder hit than newer ones, such as communications, ethnic studies, and gender studies.

In 2013, a blue-ribbon panel of the American Academy produced "The Heart of the Matter," a report commissioned by Congress on the state of the humanities. It was both a response to a highly publicized 2005 report by the National Academies calling for more investment in STEM education and research and a *cris de coeur* defending the central role of the humanities.

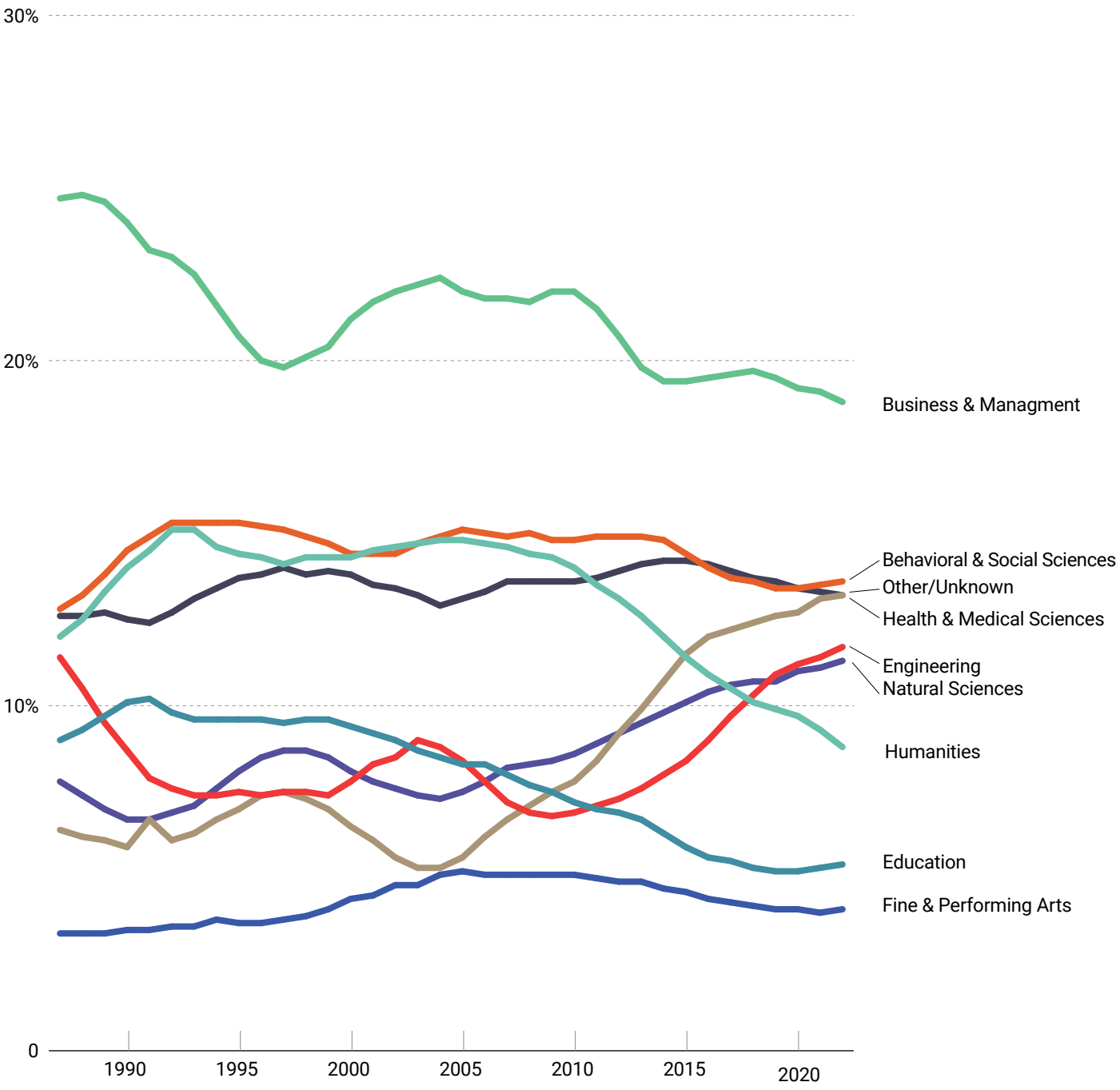
"The humanities and social sciences are not merely elective, nor are they elite or elitist," the report argues. "They go beyond the immediate and instrumental to help us understand the past and the future. They are necessary and they require our support in challenging times as well as in times of prosperity."

In the following years, the drop in humanities majors slowed down, but didn't reverse. Then the pandemic hit. Enrollments suffered across the board, but especially in the humanities.

"Before the pandemic, the question was, 'How do we get people to love us?'" says

What Students Are Majoring In

While many majors have declined since 2012, those in the humanities have been by far the hardest hit:
The share of college students majoring in humanities has dropped by about a third — from 13.1 percent to 8.8 percent.



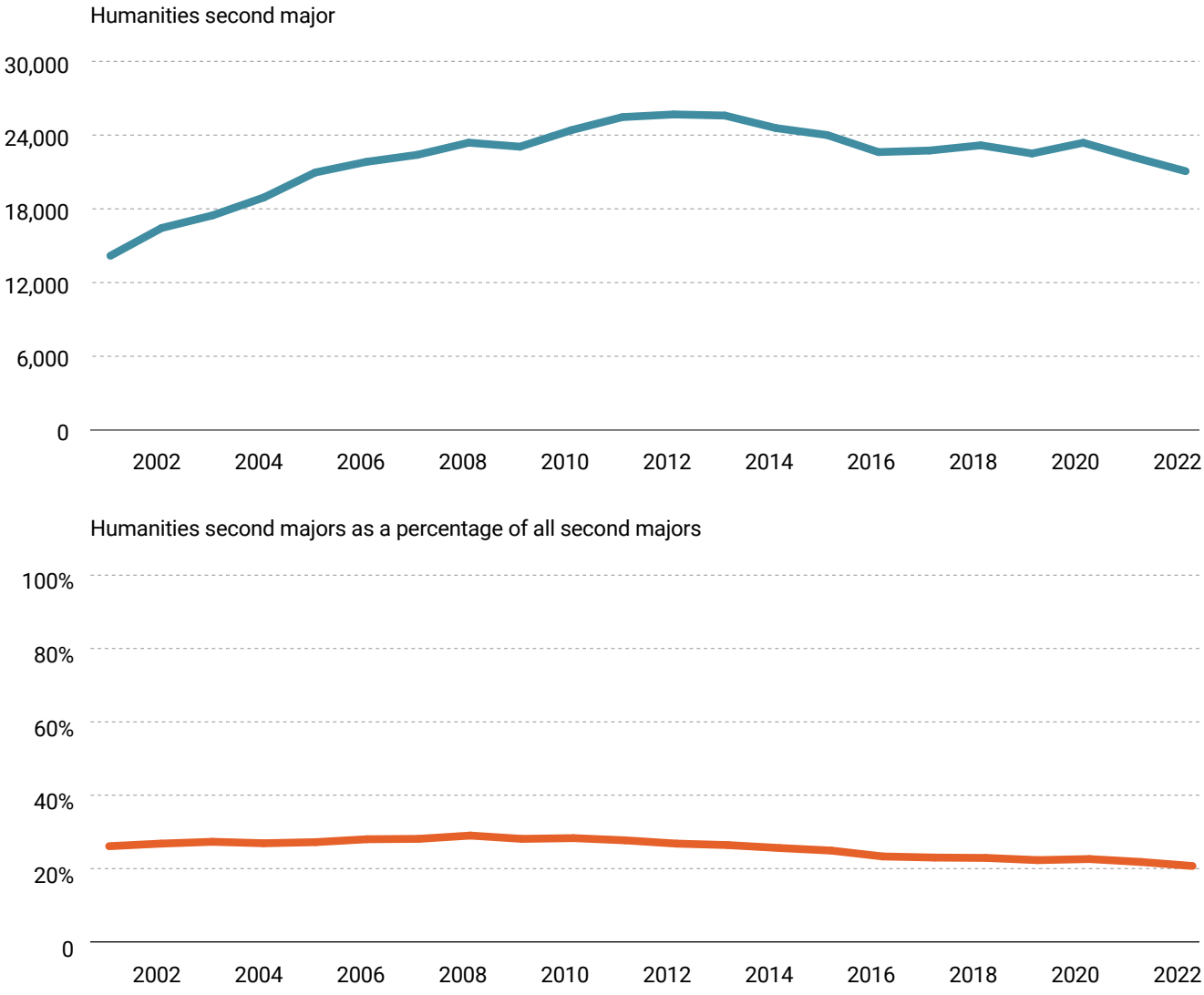
Source: Humanities Indicators, 2024. American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Christi Brookes, assistant dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences and a professor of French at Central Michigan University. "After the pandemic, it was an existential question. How do we survive?"

To the shock of many in and outside of higher ed, even flagship institutions made major cuts in humanities departments. In 2023, West Virginia University shut down 28 academic programs and made headlines for

The Often-Hidden Second Major

The humanities' share of second majors is more than twice as large as the field's share of first majors.
While those second majors have fallen in number, they have declined more slowly than first majors in the humanities.



Source: Humanities Indicators, 2024. American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

dropping all of the undergraduate majors in its department of world languages, literatures, and linguistics. Other colleges have made similar choices.

According to departmental surveys conducted by the American Academy since 2008, the number of institutions awarding four-year degrees in almost every humanities discipline increased between 2008 and 2018, but has fallen since, Townsend says. Between 2007 and 2022, the number of institutions awarding degrees in English, for example, fell by 4 percent, from 1,311 to 1,259.

The largest declines were in the fields of American studies and religion, he notes — 16 and 17 percent, respectively, over the same time period.

CULTURAL FORCES

Financial pressures are one factor; another is the enormous shift to a digital culture. Majors that typically require students to read a lot are up against a national decline in reading. A survey by the National Endowment for the Arts found that in 2022, 48.5 percent of adults said they had read a book in the previous 12 months; a decrease from 54.6 percent in 2012.

Among younger people, nonrequired reading is even less common: According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2023, just 36 percent of 13-year-olds said they read at least once a week for fun. In 1984, that figure was 70 percent.

"Thirty-five years ago, my students were in the habit of reading," says Robert Zaretsky, a professor of history at the University of Houston. "They're not now. They're great kids, they're applied, they do what you ask them to do, but they don't know how to read."

Add to that the rise in just the past couple years of generative artificial intelligence like ChatGPT, which has prompted fundamental questions about the purpose of learning — especially in the humanities. With students able to swap a few keystrokes for their own research, writing, and multimedia projects, some observers wonder if the humanities can even continue to exist.

These developments have sparked eulogies like "The College Essay is Dead" and "The End of the English Major." Though many academics — here and in other countries — take issue with the essays' assumptions, they have amplified public perception that, without drastic action, the humanities are doomed.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Other factors contributing to lower enrollments are less likely to generate headlines. In a journal article Townsend wrote with Norman Bradburn, professor emeritus and former provost of the University of Chicago, the authors point out that dual-enrollment and Advanced Placement credits in humanities have skyrocketed over the past few years.

> **"Thirty-five years ago, my students were in the habit of reading. They're not now."**

Combined with enrollments by transfer students who filled their humanities requirements at community colleges, that means a vast number of students at four-year colleges no longer take introductory courses in the humanities — which might have served as an entry into a major.

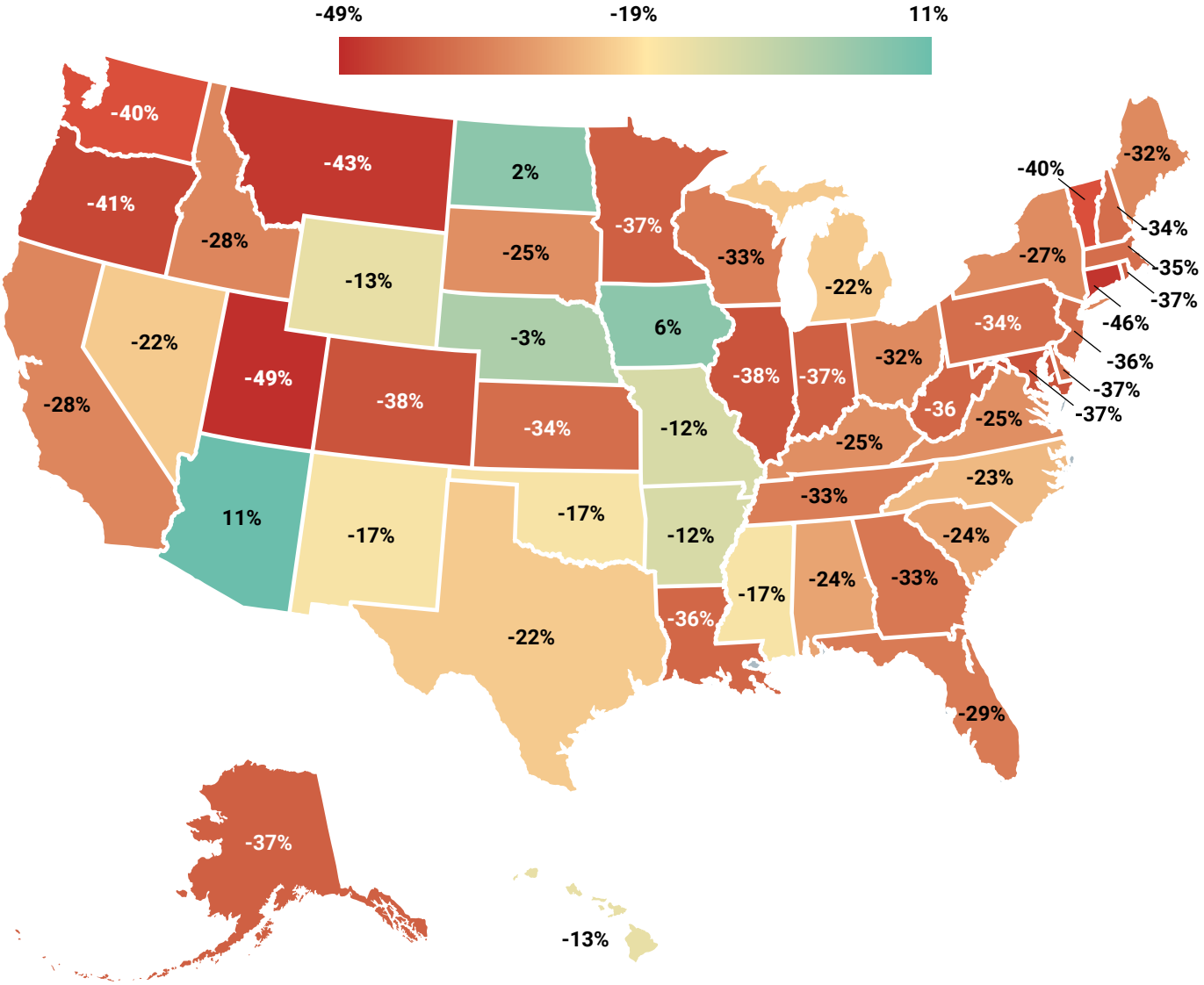
A perhaps more positive take on the numbers rests on how majors are counted: Many students double major, and often their second major is in the humanities, but fewer than half of colleges that report degree completion

to the National Center for Education Statistics include second majors. And according to an analysis by the American Academy, "the humanities' share of second majors is more than twice as large as the field's share of first majors." Those second majors in the humanities are also falling, but not as quickly.

Another problem is definitional: What does

A Nationwide Decline, With Few Exceptions

The number of humanities degrees awarded declined in all but three states between 2012 and 2021.



Source: American Academy of Arts & Sciences analysis of Ipeds data

"the humanities" mean? The National Endowment for the Humanities says they "explore, interpret, and preserve the diversity of human cultures, ideas, practices and experiences, past and present." But how does that translate into a college degree and then to a career? Often, students do not know.

To confuse matters more, sometimes "liberal arts" and "humanities" are used interchangeably; sometimes they're not. And majors are classified differently from college to college: It's usually a safe bet that French, art history, or ethnic studies are considered humanities, while psychology or anthropology can be found there or in the social sciences. At the University of Arizona, even the department of English is part of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, not the College of Humanities.

As Alain-Philippe Durand, dean of the humanities college and a professor of French, says, colleges of humanities could often be called "the college of everything else."

So, for many students — perhaps the majority — the humanities are a mystery. Natali Dueñez, who graduated with a degree in public and applied humanities from Arizona in 2022, used to serve as an ambassador for the program, encouraging students to consider the major.

"They would all ask me the same first question," she says. "'What are humanities?' And I'd tell them, 'Don't worry. I didn't know either.'"

RETHINKING PROGRAMS

There are reasons for optimism. Take Austin Community College's Great Questions seminar, which fulfills the Texas college's requirement that freshmen take a yearlong student-success course. Initiated in 2018, it requires all students to read *The Odyssey* in their first semester, along with excerpts from Plato, Euclidean geometry, and Chinese poetry, among other topics.

"Initially, there was a pushback from administration that, 'Well, I don't know if community-college students can handle a curriculum that's reading Plato and doing Euclidean geometry, and Chinese poetry might be a heavy lift for a first-generation college student in Texas,'" says Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., an associate professor of government at the college who initiated the Great Questions seminar. "And that rhetoric was really upsetting to me, specifically because I've been teaching some pretty heady political philosophy in my classes. I saw that the students not only could do it, but they really showed up for it when you offered it to them.

Colleges of humanities could often be called "the college of everything else."

Students are hungry for challenging courses if they're meaningful." (See Page 23).

Interestingly, the number of students earning associate degrees in the humanities and liberal arts has grown: In 1987, degrees in subjects with a "substantial amount of training in the humanities" made up 25.7 percent of those awarded; in 2018 that share had risen to 43.7 percent. While the reason for the increase is not clear, Townsend says it shouldn't necessarily be read as a rising interest in the field. Rather, it may reflect the number of students filling their general-education requirements (which tend to be broadly in the humanities) at community colleges to save money before transferring to four-year universities.

While the Great Questions seminars are easily recognizable as part of the humanities tradition, other programs, such as the University of Arizona's Public and Applied Human-

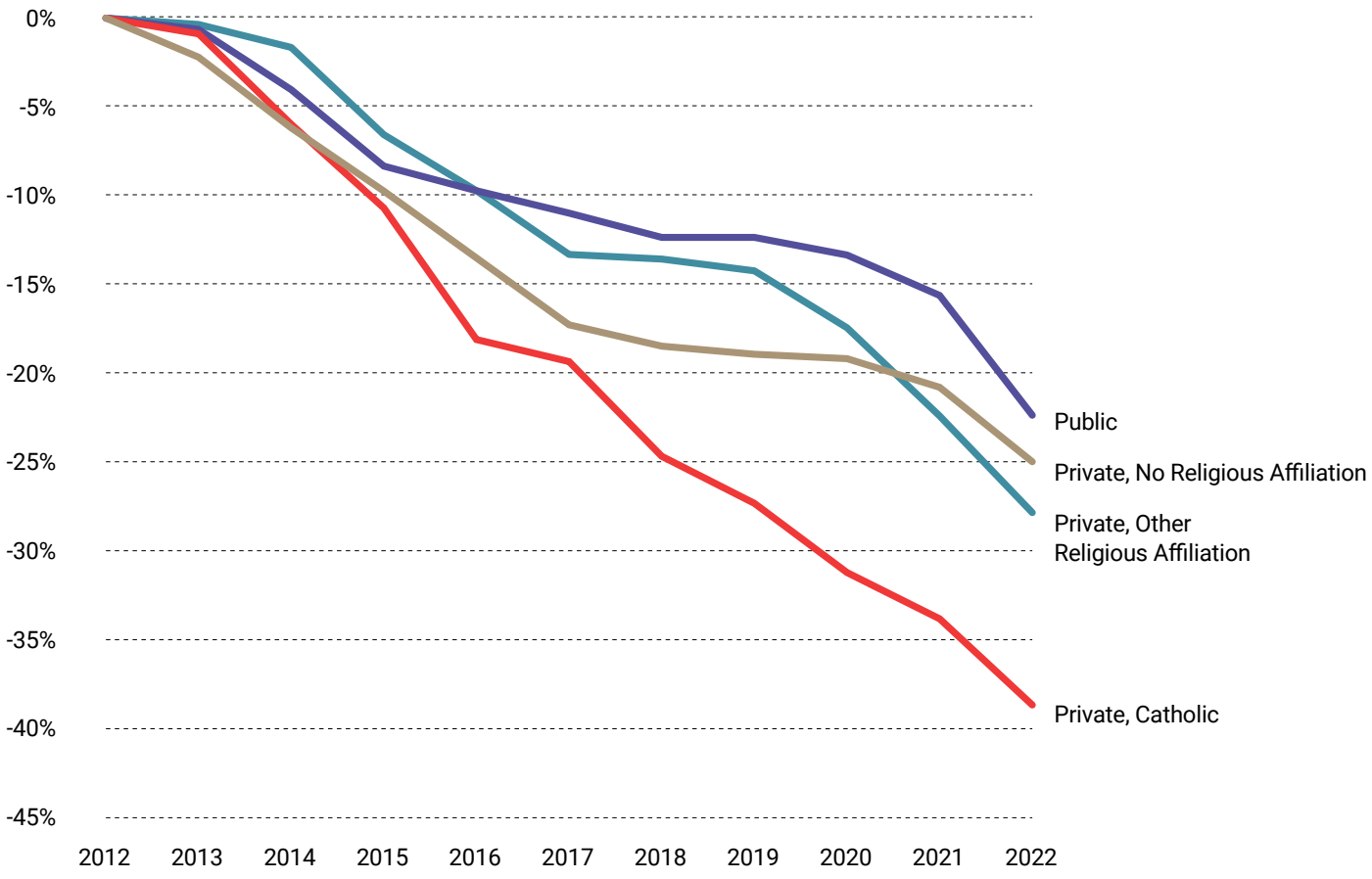
ities degree (discussed further in Section 2) can be seen as a more radical departure. Students in some of the courses study television shows, podcasts, and business texts, and they work on solutions to local problems.

"Instead of thinking about the 'traditional humanities,' we like to think about the traditions of the humanities," Durand says. "Concepts like gaining international experiences, developing multilingual identities, and practicing maneuvering in multicultural contexts are core — and ancient — humanities skills."

It's certainly a different approach, but increasingly, there's growing agreement — borne out of authentic belief as well as necessity — that colleges have to better show the relevance of humanities courses to students' lives and in the world.

Who Is Granting Degrees

Over the past decade, colleges of all types have granted fewer degrees in the humanities; the least pronounced decline has been at public institutions.



Source: American Academy of Arts & Sciences analysis of Ipeds data

"We can no longer say, 'Well, Shakespeare is great because it's Shakespeare,'" says Jacqueline Barrios, an assistant professor in Arizona's department of public and applied humanities. "We need to show how Shakespeare matters now."

In the next section, we'll explore how innovative institutions are doing that — with promising results.

"Instead of thinking about the 'traditional humanities,' we like to think about the traditions of the humanities."

SECTION 2

Winning Over Skeptical Students

MADISON DOSER, 24, was a big reader growing up. Her AP Literature class was a favorite. But when she enrolled in the University of Arizona in 2017, she was planning on majoring in chemistry and possibly pursuing a career as a research scientist.

It seemed a safe bet and, to be honest, she didn't know majoring in the humanities was an option. Then she went to admitted students' day and attended an introduction to a new major in public and applied humanities.

"I went with my mom, and they discussed what it means to be a humanities major," Doser says. "Immediately after that, I went and switched majors. The way that they talked in the lecture — about how we learn about society and cultures — made me feel like, 'well, that's what I want.'"

Charlie Herr, 18, thought he would major in financial planning at Purdue University until he took a "Transformative Texts" course in his first semester as part of his general-education requirements. He had always been interested in history, but reading "isn't my thing," he says. In the class he not only read classics, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but also learned about himself and what careers could be open to him as a humanities major.

"We were told we needed to develop an independent mind and find our own way in life," he says. When he went home on break, he told

TAKEAWAYS

- Colleges are discovering creative ways to ensure more students — of all majors — are exposed to humanities in an engaging and relevant way.
- Humanities programs should make explicit that they teach skills that lead to sustainable careers.
- Reformers say the skills learned are more important than the texts studied.
- Students describe finding purpose and meaning in their humanities courses.

his parents that financial planning was off the table: He was going to double major in history and political science.

The programs at Arizona and Purdue are examples of colleges actively drawing students to the humanities with courses that teach the skills associated with them — deep reading, historical contextualization, and intercultural understanding, for example, — in new and dynamic ways.

Colleges are also making it clearer to students that these skills can and do lead to sustainable future careers.

"We're always trying to promote those kinds of models where you put your best faculty and resources into gen-ed."

"Faculty are recognizing that they've got to go to where the students are and not sit back and wait for the students to come back to the English major or the classics major, or whatever it may be," says Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American studies at Columbia University and the president of the Teagle Foundation, which supports humanities programs. "If they wait for that to happen, their department is going to go out of business."

So what steps are they taking? A significant one is reworking entry-level general-education courses. The idea is that most undergraduates will be exposed to the humanities even if they don't decide to major in it. And they may choose to take a few other humanities courses or follow up their interest in another way.

"We're always trying to promote those kinds of models where you put your best faculty and resources into gen-ed or first-year experience courses," says Scott Muir, director of undergraduate initiatives at the National Humanities Alliance (NHA). "This is your chance to convince students" about the worth of humanities.

Creating interdisciplinary curricula — in gen ed or beyond — is another strategy to build humanities enrollments. An NHA report on "Attracting Students to the Liberal Arts Through Integrative Curricula" notes that such efforts can take the form of combining different fields within a single course or set of courses and degree programs.

"If you're going to grow enrollments or majors in the humanities, you have to be expansionist in some way," Muir says. In this challenging environment, colleges need to think about the students who will not even contemplate taking traditional humanities courses — and consider how to "build a bridge for them, so that you can show them that what you have is actually really interesting, highly relevant, and, that you're teaching skills that are really important to them."

Take what is broadly known as applied humanities, which puts humanities knowledge into practice. This often overlaps with humanities plus — interdisciplinary programs that bring in fields like business or health. Though some of these programs have been around for decades, they are receiving renewed attention.

Between 2000 and 2021 in the United States and Canada, for example, the number of undergraduate health humanities programs rose from 15 to 119, according to a study by Case Western University's School of Medicine. Of those programs, 64 were minors.

Without reshaping and reframing humanities in this way, "we're only going to get the students who are already convinced that humanities are important," says Christine Henseler, a professor of Spanish and Hispanic Studies at Union College in New York. "The cross-disciplinary humanities provide a

U. OF ARIZONA

The U. of Arizona's Humanities Ambassadors Program tries to create campus influencers to attract students to the field.

Getting Students in the Door

A GREAT CAR doesn't sell itself. And neither does a humanities program. But too many colleges assume recruiting is something the athletic department does, not liberal-arts faculty members.

That means many students who enjoy their required history or French course never consider majoring or minoring in the field because no one gives them a little push.

The University of Arizona's College of Humanities is trying to solve that problem with a recruitment director — a position most colleges on the campus have — an internal marketing team, and student ambassadors.

"My role is to increase the number of students majoring and minoring in the humanities," says Karina Rodriguez, the recruitment director. To do that, she speaks at high schools, coordinates with her university's admissions offices about upcoming campus events, and works with the college's marketing group to create campaigns such as "Choose Humanities."

She also helps run, along with four faculty

members, an annual two-day recruitment workshop required for the college's teaching assistants. One of its aims is to teach the graduate students how to encourage students enrolled in the college's general-education and required second-language courses to major or minor in humanities.

The discussions and role-playing in the workshop give them "the confidence to be able to say, 'Oh hey, it seems like you really enjoy this subject. Have you thought about continuing with Italian, with French?'" Rodriguez says. "We talk about being intentional and explicit with our students," and talent-spotting, by letting a student know they're particularly good at a subject and should think about continuing.

Most institutions don't have recruiting resources like those, but they can still go after students. LaGuardia Community College, in New York, annually holds an event to bring in new English majors; it includes a panel of people with English degrees who have gone on to successful careers — including alumni from the City University of New York (CUNY), which LaGuardia is a part of.

"We even had once the former CUNY chancellor, because he was an English major," says Gordon Tapper, a professor of English. "It was great for our students to see that."

And while it can be difficult for a community college to track graduates, his department is making a concerted effort to build its alumni network. That includes videos on the English program's webpage of graduates speaking about why they chose the English major and their current jobs.

Individual faculty members know that making sure other departments and advisers are aware of humanities offerings is important in bringing students on board. Melinda Zook, a professor of history at Purdue University who established an integrated liberal-arts certificate program called Cornerstone, says she spends a lot of her time talking to the other units across campus to make sure they're telling their students about the certificate program and what it entails.

Communicating with advisers is also key, she says. "I have to talk to them about the certificate, because if they've forgotten about it, they won't get it on their students' degree plans."

Scott Muir, director of undergraduate initiatives at the National Humanities Alliance, says not everybody in a humanities department has to do this kind of recruitment if they find it difficult or distasteful. But, he says, they have to "get out of the way of the people who want to do it."

wonderful way to centralize the importance of the humanities and to speak to the needs of students who are looking for something that is more applied and practical." Henseler is also co-founder of the Center for Humanities Communication.

Those who run applied humanities programs stress that the goal isn't just to boost enrollments, but to ensure that the future is not full of doctors, entrepreneurs, and computer scientists devoid of humanities education.

"We strongly believe that this is good for society," says Alain-Philippe Durand, dean of the University of Arizona's College of Humanities and a professor of French. "It's good for the world to have more critical thinking and creativity and compassion and empathy." He started the university's public and applied humanities degree, where students take courses in humanities and another discipline of their choice.

Durand's arguments are common: that students who study the humanities can better understand and empathize with those different from themselves, are more capable of evaluating problems from multiple view-

points, and recognize that there is more than one valid way to think about ideas.

Those assertions, of course, are very hard to measure, but a few studies lend them support. One found that comments students gave after completing an introductory humanities unit showed that they had experienced "an increased level of cultural competency, an evolution of worldview, and an enhanced level of critical thinking."

A study of 739 medical students found that the humanities not only helped them develop desirable traits but protected them from burnout. Students completed an online survey asking about their exposure to the humanities, including going to museums, theaters, dances, or concerts and reading or writing for pleasure. They then filled out more surveys that measured various attributes.

"If we have too rigid of a distinction between the applied and the traditional humanities, I think both lose."

Those who said they were more involved in some aspect of humanities scored higher on positive attributes such as empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and emotional intelligence, and lower on feelings such as physical and mental exhaustion.

"There's a very real concern that once you're a doctor, have we set you up to burn out instantly, or have we set you up with some of the skills to revel in the human complexity?" says Perri Klass, a professor at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine, who helped start NYU's medical humanities undergraduate minor as a way to address that concern.

Anissa Ince, a senior at Tuskegee University, a historically Black college in Alabama, says she learned "about life" by minoring in global humanities — a relatively new program at the college. Combined with study abroad and community service, she says, her classes taught her "how to help others and encourage others to help you — and why that's so important, especially in a Black community."

Institutions have tried different methods to spread awareness of the humanities beyond higher education, so that students arrive on campus with more understanding of it. The University of California at Berkeley, for example, promotes its faculty members' public appearances and features stories about their research on its website. It has seen a 32-percent increase in humanities majors: 1,779 students in 2023, up from a low of 1,344 in 2020.

The University of Utah and the University of Arizona pay students to be humanities ambassadors, like Natali Dueñez, whom we met in Section 1, to reach out to students through social media and other forums.

All this interdisciplinarity and cheerleading feels uncomfortable — even wrongheaded — to some in the field. Critics including the literary scholar and legal theorist Stanley Fish have asserted that any argument for the humanities that focuses on practical skills, intellectual habits, or ethical values will fail, either because it overpromises or because it denies the intrinsic value of the disciplines. "The justification of the humanities is not only an impossible task but an unworthy one," Fish wrote in an essay in *The Chronicle*, "because to engage in it is to acknowledge, if only implicitly, that the humanities cannot stand on their own and do not on their own have an independent value." Ultimately, Fish concludes, "I can't think of a plan that would return the humanities to the prominence they once enjoyed."

But views such as these are becoming less

pronounced. Concerns about making the humanities too instrumental or transactional typically come from those at highly selective colleges, Muir says. "We hardly ever hear that from community-college faculty or faculty at comprehensive regionals, or even at nonselective liberal-arts colleges. We hear that from the most privileged, because they don't actually have to change. Their jobs are secure. But if they care about a future in their disciplines and their departments, they should care more about this."

Colleges also shouldn't get too caught up in definitions, says Sara Guyer, a professor of English and dean of arts and humanities at the University of California at Berkeley. "If we have too rigid of a distinction between the applied and the traditional humanities, I think both lose," she says.

> **"We all have some kind of general shared mission, but we all have different populations and different leadership models and different faculty models."**

And while it's important that institutions learn from one another, every humanities program will, and should, look different.

"We all have some kind of general shared mission, but we all have different populations and different leadership models and different faculty models," Guyer says. "Faculty and academic leaders need to think critically and thoughtfully about what's right for their institution in order to sustain the humanities as a rigorous and meaningful part of the university — not just as a handmaiden or support system to other areas. It'll look different at Arizona State than it'll look at Berkeley, even though we're both large public universities."

Let's take a closer look at some of those widely varying reform efforts.

APPLIED HUMANITIES: University of Arizona

Applied humanities is not a new term; broadly it means the study and use of the humanities to better understand and help solve real-world problems. Sometimes called humanities plus, it is often interdisciplinary: medical humanities, environmental humanities, and digital humanities are longstanding examples.

When Durand, the University of Arizona French professor, became dean of its College of Humanities in 2015, he realized that something was misaligned. Parents and students worried that a humanities major was a path to unemployment, but companies were saying they needed employees with the very skills that the humanities, when done well, foster in students: the ability to reason critically, ethically, and analytically, to communicate in writing and speaking, and to collaborate in teams.

The way to bridge that gap, Durand says, was to create a new bachelor's degree in humanities that better developed those skills and made them more explicit.

Started in 2017 with eight faculty members reassigned from other units, the public and applied humanities department now boasts 406 majors and 172 graduates. Students must complete 42 credits; 18 of those are in a professional emphasis. Eleven are offered including business administration, engineering approaches, fashion studies, game studies, and medicine. Students are also required to do an internship.

The department has 20 faculty members who are expected to be able to teach any course it offers, rather than focus on the specific discipline in which they were trained, Durand says.

Students take three core courses that double

SPOTLIGHT: AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Asking the 'Great Questions'

THE CHALLENGE: Administrators were skeptical that community-college students could handle difficult texts.

THE STRATEGY: Pilot a small noncredit course, train faculty members to lead discussion-based seminars so all students participate, and show administrators how the course built students' confidence.

THE RESULT: Students who take the seminar have higher-than-average persistence rates, and the program is being widely imitated.

FIRST the students spend four weeks reading all of Homer's *The Odyssey*. Then they connect it to excerpts from Plato, Euclid, Sappho, and Rumi.

In the penultimate class of one Great Questions seminar at Austin Community College — taught by Debbie Wing-Chi Lee, an adjunct professor of humanities — the students share short poems they wrote based on Chinese characters.

Pixie Pelland wrote about her grandmother losing her memory. Adriana Arevalo celebrated being a mother. Damian Gonzalez described feeling exhausted and purposeless.

The Great Questions seminars, which have expanded into a foundation and a fellowship program, are an example of how community colleges are creating innovative humanities curricula.

The program began in 2015, when a new provost, Charles M. Cook, made a student-success course mandatory for students entering with fewer than 12 college credits.

Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., an associate professor of government and humanities, who was on the faculty senate at the time, thought it important to offer another choice, one more academic and perhaps more challenging.

"We had a very long, just bloody bureaucratic knockdown. You know, fight after fight for years, really," he says, where campus leaders were wary that Hadzi-Antich, and colleagues who now are on board, were proposing something that was too difficult for community-college students.

So he and other faculty members began a two-year pilot, offering Great Questions as an uncredited course through continuing education. In the first year, five or six students met every Wednesday. In the second year, that grew to about a dozen.

At the end of two years, students from the course gathered in a focus group. The students talked about how the seminar sparked a love of learning, gave them confidence to ask questions in other classes, and taught them how to critically analyze all sorts of texts.

As one student said, "I hate asking questions, because I want to feel like I can do everything on my own. But this seminar completely shattered that — it really made me really see the importance of questioning. It's not scary anymore."

"That was the most persuasive evidence," Hadzi-Antich says.

That focus group and a grant from the Teagle Foundation provided the momentum needed

CATALIN ABAGIU, AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Students, faculty members, and local residents discuss a James Baldwin essay in an event that is part of Austin Community College's Great Questions seminar.

to get the administration on board to offer the course for credit to fulfill the student-success requirement and provide professional development. To date about 150 faculty members, who must be qualified to teach in the humanities, have been trained to teach the courses.

The course is capped at 25 students, instead of the usual 36, and the college offers fully online, hybrid, and fully in-class options.

A report by Hadzi-Antich and two colleagues states that from the fall of 2019 through the spring of 2022, those who took the Great Questions seminar had a 98-percent persistence rate, compared with 92 percent for those enrolled in the effective-learning course.

The fall-to-fall rate over the same period was 85 percent, compared with 77 percent for those who completed the effective-learning course.

Hadzi-Antich and his colleagues then created the Great Questions Foundation, funding it out of their own pockets initially and then receiving private donations and a Teagle grant. Started in 2019, its goal is to help community-college faculty members teach similar seminars. It also works with them to develop curricula to embed the seminars' concepts of discussion-based study of transformative texts into general-education courses. So far, faculty members from 60 institutions have taken the summer online workshops, he says.

Through a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Great Questions Foundation also initiated a two-year faculty fellowship grant in 2023; it supports 20 community-college faculty members nationwide to work together and redesign a general-education course, which doesn't have to be text-based, to teach on the model of Great Questions.

as general-education classes: "Introduction to Applied Humanities," "Applied Humanities Practices: Techniques and Technologies for Public Enrichment," and "Intercultural Competence: Culture and Identity." Other classes focus on topics as varied as the humanities perspective on the global economy and "Memes: The Art of Microstorytelling."

For example, students in "Innovation and the Human Condition" might read, among other things, an article about the "Big Five Personality Traits," a study of antiheroes in contemporary television shows, and an article on creating community business models. They will also listen to an episode of the podcast *Freakonomics*.

As part of the class, small teams of students identify and analyze a problem that affects people in the community or beyond and research ways to address it. The teams create a data-driven solution through primary and secondary research "based on the principles and concepts central to the humanities' intellectual and analytical traditions." They then present their solution to a panel of experts.

Different faculty members bring different approaches to each course. When Jacqueline Barrios, an assistant professor of public and applied humanities, teaches "Innovation and the Human Condition," and focuses on water contamination, students read poetry by Indigenous writers, listen to musical compositions by local artists, and examine a Superfund plume map.

A seminar she piloted uses Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and other literary texts to study place and reinterpret urban areas, including the city of Tucson. In the course, which is still being developed, students will create festivals, exhibitions, films, and memes. "I want to use the novel to see our own communities differently," she says.

Karen Seat, head of the university's department of religious studies and classics, credits the public and applied humanities program with the development of a new degree: a bachelor's of science in religious studies for health professionals, which was first offered in 2023.

While the concept began brewing a number of years ago, Seat says, the success of the new department inspired her and her colleagues to move ahead.

"It made us realize that this is really something that students are interested in and also helped us get it through approval processes at the university," she says.

Over all, Durand says, the number of humanities majors at Arizona has increased by 45 percent since 2016, to 1,176 in the fall of 2024.

"It exposed me to things that I wouldn't necessarily have read on my own or found out on my own."

Doser, a first-generation student and one of the department's first graduates, is now a second-year law student at Wake Forest University. She hasn't regretted her decision to join the brand-new major.

"It exposed me to things that I wouldn't necessarily have read on my own or found out on my own," says Doser. Courses such as one on intercultural competence made her more empathetic and better able to relate to her clients, she says — in law school she acts as a "defense attorney" for students who have violated the honor code.

"I can see what happened and form a case and defend them in a situation that is really difficult," she says. "And I think my humanities education helps me with that."

A SMALLER-SCALE APPROACH: Central Michigan University

The program at the University of Arizo-

na intrigued Christi Brookes, a professor of French at Central Michigan University and assistant dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences.

Her university, like most in Michigan, had been facing low growth and lean budgets in most areas, but particularly in the humanities. Her college tried different transdisciplinary initiatives over the years to revitalize humanities majors, Brookes says, but none quite took off.

With support from the dean, Brookes joined with Greg Smith, an associate professor of history, world languages, and cultures and the director of academic initiatives, to figure out if a model like Arizona's "would even work in the college, because it's such a novel way of doing a degree in the humanities." A big hurdle, Brookes says, was "finding the people who were willing to break beyond their boundaries."

"When we talk to our colleagues in business, in particular, and also to a lesser extent in sciences, they want to teach that kind of deep dive."

The main opposition to a new public and applied liberal arts degree came from the college itself, Brookes says.

"Some of it was, 'I'm just not interested in doing something like that,'" she says. "Some of it was more, 'This is an existential threat to us.'" Colleagues in some humanities departments worried that the new major would lure away students "and therefore cut that small, very small piece of the pie into smaller pieces," she adds.

But the university's six other colleges were, for the most part, eager to join the new experiment. "When we talk to our colleagues in business, in particular, and also to a lesser extent in sciences, they want to teach that kind of deep dive," Smith says. "Not just a superficial glance at ethics to make sure that business majors don't break the rules or become evil, but actually to have a more solid foundation in social-justice issues, as well as history and the humanities." The College of Business Administration offered to collaborate with an emphasis in entrepreneurship and the College of Science and Engineering with an emphasis in resilient environments — broadly, environmental sustainability.

With university funding, they then set up a team of seven — five faculty members from the College of Liberal Arts and one from each of the two other colleges involved — and in the summer of 2023 hashed out course syllabi.

The first course, "Introduction to Public and Applied Liberal Arts," started in the fall of 2024 with 16 students. Brookes and Smith taught the class together. It was a challenge.

"Trying to figure out how to articulate this new field to new students, freshmen, largely, has been difficult," Brookes says.

One strategy they used was to reflect on the origins of a classical liberal-arts education. Canonized in medieval times, they consisted of the quadrivium (geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music) and the trivium (grammar or reading, logic or philosophy, and rhetoric).

In a sense, Smith says, they're trying to come up with a new trivium, or rather a modern coinage of the old ideas. "We really need to articulate the specific skills we are trying to realize — how to listen, how to read, how to persuade, how to think, and how to communicate."

Brookes says the goal is to increase the size of the major over the next five years to

around 50 students. In the fall of 2025, a third emphasis, fashion and interior design, will be added.

HUMANITIES PLUS: New York University and DePauw University

Humanities-plus programs are a slightly narrower model of applied humanities and typically combine two specific fields; among the most popular are health humanities, environmental humanities, business humanities, and digital humanities. Most of these are not new — for example, health humanities (or medical humanities) have been taught for decades but have typically been taught at the graduate level. Now undergraduate and community-college programs are growing. For example, in 2021 LaGuardia Community College initiated an associate degree in the field; it currently has 39 majors, says Christine Marks, a professor of English who co-directs the program.

New York University started its medical humanities minor in 2023. An impetus, Klass says, was the number of pre-med students who wanted to combine a career of medicine and writing, as she has. There was no obvious path.

"Some of them want very much to be doctors, but they were feeling like everything else is getting squeezed out of their education," she says.

Medical humanities is not about enticing medical students to the humanities or humanities majors into the health field, she adds, but about deepening and broadening their foundational knowledge, their ways of looking at the world, and their ability to understand others who aren't like them.

Too often pre-med students "were kind of terrified of the discourse where you read a short story or a poem and people ask you what you see in it. It's not a problem set, and there aren't right answers," Klass says. On the other hand, non-science students worried they were out of their depth with anything that smacked of science.

"I would say to them, You don't have to know it all. You must know the difference between viruses and bacteria," she says. "If you're an English major, I'm going to say to you, It's part of understanding cholera as a character. It's part of understanding HIV as a character."

> **"I'm realizing that there are all these really interesting philosophical questions about, in this case, business or economics, that just weren't on my radar when I first came out of grad school."**

For Jeffrey Dunn, an assistant professor of philosophy at DePauw University, in Indiana, the idea for a business and humanities course started with the opening of the university's School of Business and Leadership in 2023, which touts its liberal-arts ethos.

With the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, in 2024 Dunn initiated a series of reading groups and workshops among faculty members across disciplines to determine how to best connect business education and humanities.

"Our guiding idea is that there's something for both sides of this equation," he says. "Humanities shouldn't be a haven for students who

don't want to think about the important role that business plays in structuring our society and that, actually, business as an institution is worthy of humanities scholarship. But, equally, business education shouldn't be a haven for students who don't want to engage with questions about meaning and values and history — those things that the humanities do."

Just as computer scientists sometimes design apps with help from consumers, Dunn and his colleagues decided to try to design the business and humanities program with help from students. During DePauw's January 2025 winter term, seven faculty members jointly taught about 15 students with the idea of brainstorming new courses or modules and a curriculum together. It's not clear yet if it will be a major, minor, or some combination of courses, Dunn says.

Dunn, who has taught for 15 years at DePauw, says offering these kinds of humanities-plus programs responds to a student body that seems more career-focused and more fearful than past students of not finding a job.

But more than that, he says, he himself has changed.

"I'm realizing that there are all these really interesting philosophical questions about, in this case, business or economics, that just weren't on my radar when I first came out of grad school," he says.

TRANSFORMATIVE TEXTS: PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Around 2011, Purdue University, a heavily STEM-oriented school, started seeing some of its humanities courses shrink and ultimately close. "We were lucky to get 10 students in some classes," says Melinda Zook, a professor of history there. "You would see a full schedule of classes, and then you'd see it rapidly dwindle as they had to start canceling classes," because there were too few students.

From 2011 to 2015, the College of Liberal Arts saw a 37-percent drop in majors. To staunch the bleeding, in 2015 the college hired a new dean, David Rheingold. And he tapped Zook to create an integrated liberal-arts program — that is, to integrate humanities into STEM programs.

At the time, the only two humanities courses in the general-education requirements were focused on English composition and public speaking.

Beginning in 2017, Zook and her colleagues created two first-year courses, called "Transformative Texts." They have become the primary ways students fulfill the university's requirements for writing and communications skills.

These were the parameters she laid out: The courses would largely be taught by full-time faculty members from a variety of disciplines within the College of Liberal Arts. They would be capped at 30 students. Each section would focus on a different topic using a combination of texts — half classics and core texts from around the world.

"You can't take a professor of sociology, and say, 'You're going to teach English Comp.' They would go to another university," Zook says. "But you can take that same scholar and say, 'Guess what? I've got this very innovative sort of 'Great Books' course. You can teach this course in a way that you love to teach it, and you know, would you be interested?'"

In addition, Zook established a certificate program called Cornerstone, which students can complete by taking three more upper-level liberal-arts courses in addition to the "Transformative Texts" classes. The College of Technology now requires students to complete the certificate, Zook says, and she is hoping other colleges will as well.

There are now 110 faculty members teaching in Cornerstone. Zook says having mainly professors as instructors rather than graduate students was key for several reasons: the experience and depth the professors could bring not just to the content matter but to relating to students, something she says is particularly important

when teaching students who went through high school during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"It's not just that the pandemic really hurt their communication skills," she says. "I think that emotionally, psychologically, it was very detrimental to them. I think one of the reasons that we've been so successful with the gateway sequence is, not only because it's required, but that we've provided them with a homeroom, a place that they feel safe, a place that they know the faculty member."

Since 2017, some 37,000 students have taken the courses — this despite the fact that about half of Purdue's incoming first-year students test out of the required humanities courses with advanced placement credit. Last fall, 51 percent of first-year students were enrolled in a "Transformative Text" course, Zook says.

In addition, 555 students are enrolled in the Cornerstone program; 614 have received the certificate, she says.

Part of the success of the program is seen in the number of new faculty members hired in the College of Liberal Arts, she adds. "Over the past three years, we have hired 95 new faculty members, most of whom have a 50-percent teaching obligation in Cornerstone."

SPOTLIGHT: UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO

Where Students Flock to Philosophy

THE CHALLENGE: For students to see how an ancient humanities field connects to their lives today.

THE STRATEGY: Combine it with social sciences and real-world experiences to help students understand its relevance.

THE RESULT: The program has been so successful that the philosophy faculty is growing.

TWO YEARS AGO, the University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York system, was in the unusual position of going on something of a hiring spree for philosophy faculty; it brought seven on board.

This was partially due to a new major it launched in 2021, philosophy, political science and economics (PPE).

> "Part of what we're doing is building up the skills of students so they can see how humanistic problems or insights play out in the world."

For a degree program that was established more than a century ago at Oxford University, PPE has become awfully popular in the 21st century.

Seventy colleges nationwide offer the major or minor, and "I'm adding one to two new U.S. programs to the list monthly," says Kori Hensell, managing director of the Politics, Philosophy and Economic Society and of the program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The society is planning to do more research on growth trends and their impact on career trajectories over the next few years, she says.

Ryan Muldoon, a professor of philosophy and the driving force behind the University of Buffalo's PPE program, was a senior research fellow at the University of Pennsylvania in the program there. He moved to Buffalo in 2015 and wanted to replicate its success.

It started as a minor, housed in the philosophy department, in 2020; it became a major in 2021 and now has 40 students enrolled.

"Part of what we're doing is building up the skills of students so they can see how humanistic problems or insights play out in the world, and how they can turn that into real choices they make as a citizen, or as a policymaker, or as a decision maker in a firm," Muldoon says.

PPE majors must take two core classes in each discipline: philosophy, political science, and economics. They also are required to choose one out of a series of classes grouped under three subject areas: game, decision theory, policy and change, and political economy.

MEREDITH FORREST KULWICKI, U. AT BUFFALO

Mirna Cadet (right) and her classmates at the U. at Buffalo collected more than 1,000 books for the reading areas of the Buffalo City Mission. With her is April Parkhill, adult education coordinator for the shelter.

Additional courses in the major include a broad array of topics, such as "Race, Class, Gender and the City," "Nonprofit Management," and "Comparative Foreign Policies." As their capstone project, PPE majors come up with an idea for improving their community. Examples include starting a tutoring program in Buffalo public schools and building libraries in local homeless shelters.

"We don't give them a menu of options," Muldoon says. "They decide what is important to them. Part of their task is to think about what would make the world better. What values are they looking to promote? The course helps students think through the complex tradeoffs between values and constraints."

Aside from developing the PPE major, Buffalo has also doubled its number of philosophy majors since 2021 to 50. Muldoon attributes this to a concerted effort by the philosophy department to attract more students through better marketing. That includes redesigning the department's website, rewriting all course descriptions, and reconsidering titles of courses "to make sure that they convey information about what the course is about to someone that doesn't know anything about philosophy," he says.

Philosophy faculty members also send an email out to students who have taken one philosophy course, suggesting what might be a good follow-up course to take. Since those emails started going out about five years ago, Muldoon says, repeat enrollment has jumped about 10 percent.

"We're trying to take advantage of latent student interest," he says.

SECTION 3

Puncturing the Myth of Low Wages

IF THERE IS ONE MYTH that humanities advocates would like to dispel, it's that a degree in a non-STEM field is a passport to a life of low wages and unemployment.

Yet this pernicious belief refuses to die. Higher-education institutions and associations increasingly understand that they have to far more overtly — and in a variety of creative ways — change the narrative.

Perhaps few will be as bold as the University of Arizona's department of public and applied humanities, which announced via a huge billboard on an Arizona highway that "Humanities = Jobs."

But other colleges are collecting and highlighting data that show positive career outcomes for humanities majors. They are also inviting successful alumni with such degrees to talk with students. And they are training faculty members, graduate students, and counselors to unambiguously draw the connection for undergraduates between skills they learn in humanities classes and those employers need.

"Student concern about career prospects is our biggest challenge, but it's also our greatest opportunity," says Scott Muir, director of undergraduate initiatives at the National Humanities Alliance. "Because the gap between what people think and what the reality is — what the data actually show — is that humanities majors are not particularly struggling. They're right there in the middle of the college-graduate premium."

THE NUMBERS

It has always been easier to draw a direct line from STEM degrees to job opportunities than from humanities degrees. But over the past

TAKEAWAYS

- Humanities majors usually end up in careers that pay well.
- Now, more than ever, employers are looking for job candidates who know how to communicate and analyze.
- The rise of artificial intelligence may mean more jobs for those with liberal-arts degrees.
- Students should be able to understand — and articulate — the career relevance of their chosen field.

decade or so, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, among others, has worked to concretely illustrate career paths for humanities majors.

The first step was to show, with statistics, that there is a career path. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the American Academy found that unemployment, despite popular perception, is not a big problem for humanities majors: Only slightly more graduates with bachelor's degrees in humanities — 3.6 percent compared with 2.9 percent of all graduates with bachelor's degrees — were unemployed in 2018. The unemployment rate for those with only a high-school diploma was 5.3 percent.

"A major doesn't plug you into an earnings stream automatically. It depends what you do with it."

So, the English major is working, but as a barista? Generally, no. Sixty-one percent, another report by the American Academy found, have jobs in "management, professional, and related occupations."

Nor are their earnings strikingly lower than those of their classmates who majored in other fields. Numbers from the American Community Survey also show that graduates with humanities baccalaureates earn about $8,000 less annually than all graduates (a median of $64,000 compared with $72,000 in 2021) according to an American Academy report. And median earnings for humanities graduates that year were 56 percent higher than the figures for workers with only a high-school diploma.

Those are snapshots from one year, rather than a longitudinal view of employees at the entry level and those near retirement, says Robert B. Townsend, who oversees the humanities, arts, and culture programs for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. While most research doesn't show that humanities majors close the salary gap over their working life, David Deming, a professor of political economy in the Harvard Kennedy School, and Kadeem Noray, a Ph.D. student, note in a study that "the relative earnings advantage for graduates majoring in applied subjects such as computer science, engineering, and business is highest at labor-market entry and declines rapidly over time."

One of the reasons, Deming says, is that specific technical skills tend to grow obsolete, but so-called soft skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability, grow more valuable.

Ten years ago, for instance, it seemed like becoming a software developer guaranteed a steady income and job for life. Now, the supply far exceeds the demand, and many have been laid off over the past few years. "The way I would think about it is that a major doesn't plug you into an earnings stream automatically" he says. "It depends on what you do with it."

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2024 job-outlook report, the top competencies employers want are communication, teamwork, and critical-thinking skills. The key attributes employers are looking for on résumés are problem-solving skills, the ability to work in a team, written communication skills, and a strong work ethic. Technical skills and quantitative and analytical skills rank seventh and eighth.

Although the words "competencies" and "skills" are often used interchangeably, Judy Anderson, director of career readiness at the

U. OF ARIZONA

A U. of Arizona billboard advertises its humanities programs.

University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts, says "competencies are really higher-level cognitive abilities." What students are learning in the classroom is "a very complex, dynamic way of thinking."

Jenny Dearborn, chief people strategy officer for the consulting company BTS, has been in talent acquisition in the technology arena for decades; she says she is always looking for job candidates who are academically trained in analytical thinking, problem-communication skills, and cross-cultural awareness. Career success is about "leadership, the speed of your critical thinking in meetings, and the ability to connect huge disparate ideas."

"Technology automates away the things that used to differentiate us and commoditizes things that used to make people outstanding performers," she says. "What's left is your ability to communicate and think and challenge ideas — not just write software."

Dearborn uses a hypothetical example when she's giving speeches, an updated version of the old "trolley problem." A Tesla self-driving car with one person in the car is heading toward an unavoidable crash into a family of four. The car knows all this is happening and can decide to swerve and kill

its one passenger or hit the family and save the passenger.

"What decision does the Tesla car brain make?" Dearborn says. "If this were ever a scenario that Tesla engineers had to think through, would you want there to be only computer-science people around the table making that hypothetical decision? Or would you want people saying, 'What's the right thing for humanity? What's the right thing for our culture? Is there an alignment of values that we need to understand? Do we need to think through the bigger-picture things?'"

"If I were sending a student to school right now, I would absolutely be encouraging them to take a liberal-arts degree."

She finds herself drawn to job candidates who majored in the humanities, but her ideal applicant, she says, is one who double-majored or majored and minored in liberal arts and technology or science.

Many believe that the advent of generative artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT will make humanities competencies more desirable, not less, as basic and redundant tasks become automated.

"In the past 10 to 20 years, we've pushed students towards STEM degrees because we felt like they would have stable, steady jobs," says Lindsey McInerney, a consultant and scholar in residence at McMaster University, in Canada, who has given a TEDx Talk on the role of the humanities in the age of AI. " "But because of the way AI works, it's actually those kinds of skill sets that are going to get commoditized first by AI. If I were sending a student to school right now, I would absolutely be encouraging them to take a liberal-arts degree. I think it's the most defensible degree of the future."

COMMUNICATING THE DIFFERENCE

Of course, the humanities majors are not the only ones that teach critical thinking, teamwork, and other competencies; many — in fact, most — students in every field collaborate on projects to solve problems. Therefore, articulating the differences between what humanities majors and others can offer is critical, although sometimes difficult.

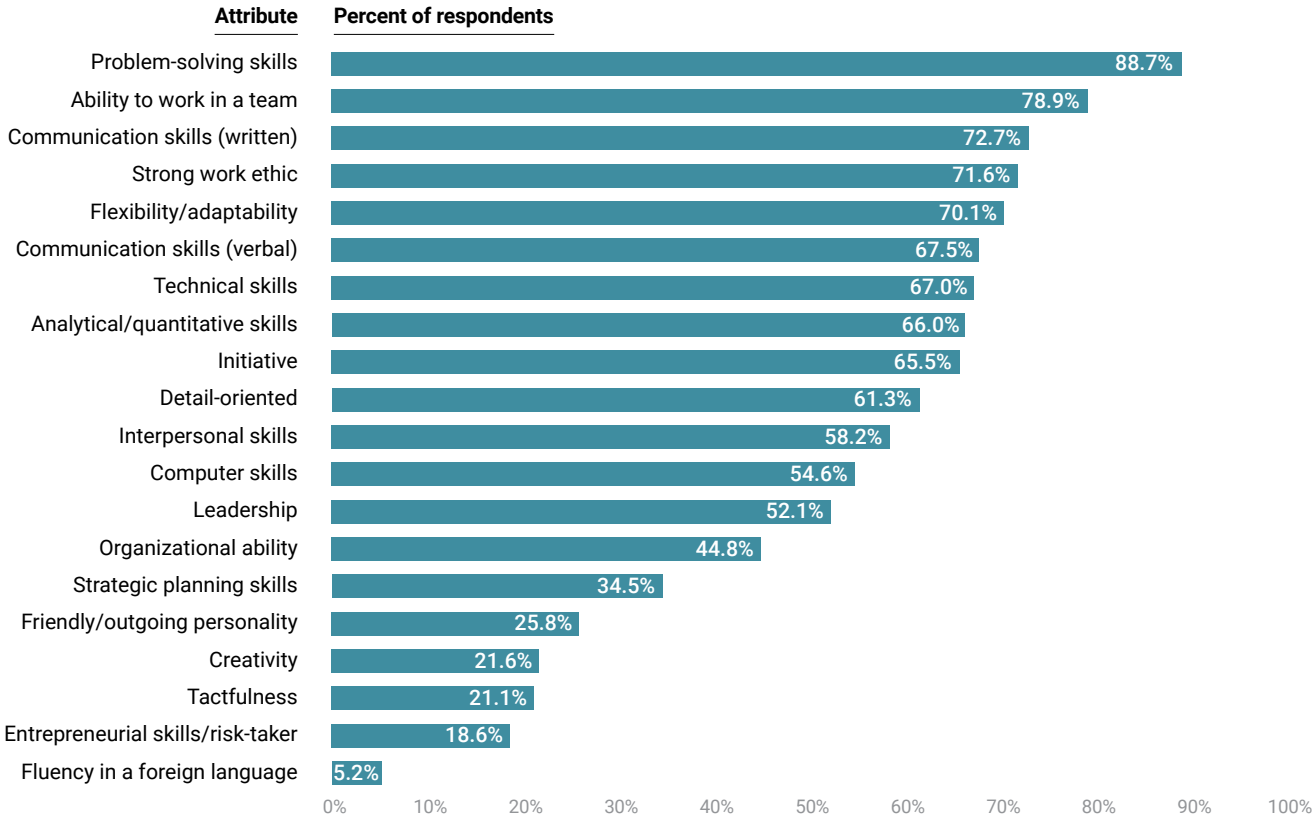
"I think it's a different level of abstraction and an ability to see the bigger picture," says Ascan Koerner, associate dean for strategic initiatives at the University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts. "I actually hear from a lot of my friends in the science, engineering, or the business school that they have these very bright students that are very good in the particular thing they're doing, but they often lack the bigger picture."

But as Alan Liu, a professor of English at the University of California at Santa Barbara, notes, while emphasizing the practical use of a humanities education is one reasonable tactic in promoting the field, it shouldn't be the only one.

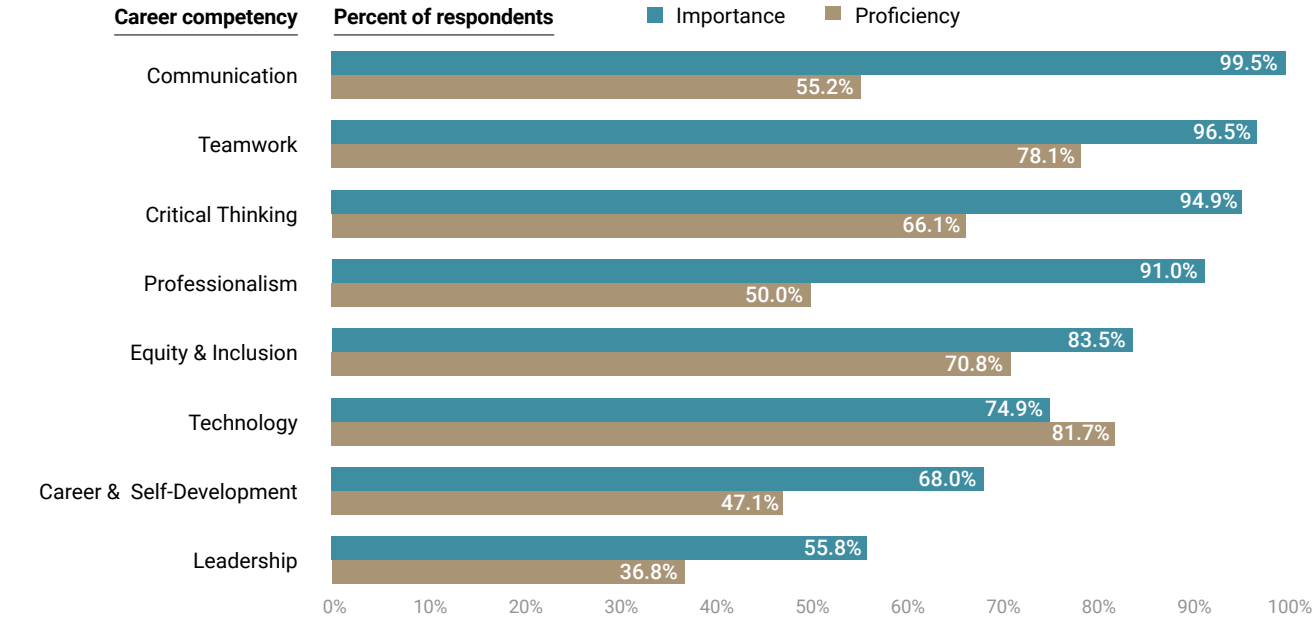
"I think those are very important arguments to make, but I think they have to be paired with what is called the innate qualities or values of the humanities as well," he says. "Those are the more traditional kinds of values: how it builds you up as a person, how it builds up a civilization as a culture. It's a student you talk to who says, 'You know, I fell in love with Jane Austen and it has really reshaped my life.' Or today, more likely is 'this musical band that I identify with and changed my identity in some way.'"

Employers Want the Skills That the Humanities Build

Employers rate problem-solving skills, teamwork, and written communication significantly higher than technical skills among the attributes they seek in job candidates.



Importance vs. proficiency on career readiness competencies



Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers 2024 Job Outlook

Humanities is not the only discipline that has had to sell itself, he points out; science too had to learn how to promote itself to the wider public, and science communication is now a robust professional field. The humanities need to do something similar, Liu says. For that reason, in 2023 he and Christine Henseler, a professor of Spanish and Hispanic studies at Union College, in New York, founded the Center for Humanities Communication.

"The phrase 'critical thinking' means absolutely zero to the ordinary person until it's applied in some kind of context."

In September 2024, the center, which is fiscally sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, brought together representatives from humanities, science-communication, media, foundations, and other fields to discuss how to better present the humanities. The center recently received a Mellon Foundation grant through AAC&U that will allow it to build up its organization to become a self-sustaining nonprofit, Liu adds, as well as develop professional training workshops and internship programs for "humanities communicators."

"Selling the humanities as soft skills, communication skills — it's not working because we're not doing even that well. The phrase 'critical thinking' means absolutely zero to the ordinary person until it's applied in some kind of context," Liu says. "We need to provide specific examples of how humanities majors flourish in the actual marketplace."

CREATING CAREER READINESS

The University of Minnesota has focused on efforts to do exactly that — tangibly connect the humanities and the marketplace — for a decade, and has now become a model for other institutions.

In 2015, the university's College of Liberal Arts, under the auspices of a new dean, adopted a strategic plan that included career readiness as one of its four pillars, along with research, diversity, and community engagement.

Like most higher-education institutions, the college was seeing a drop in humanities majors, says Koerner, the associate dean. The college serves about 40 percent of all undergraduates at the university and includes social sciences as well as the humanities.

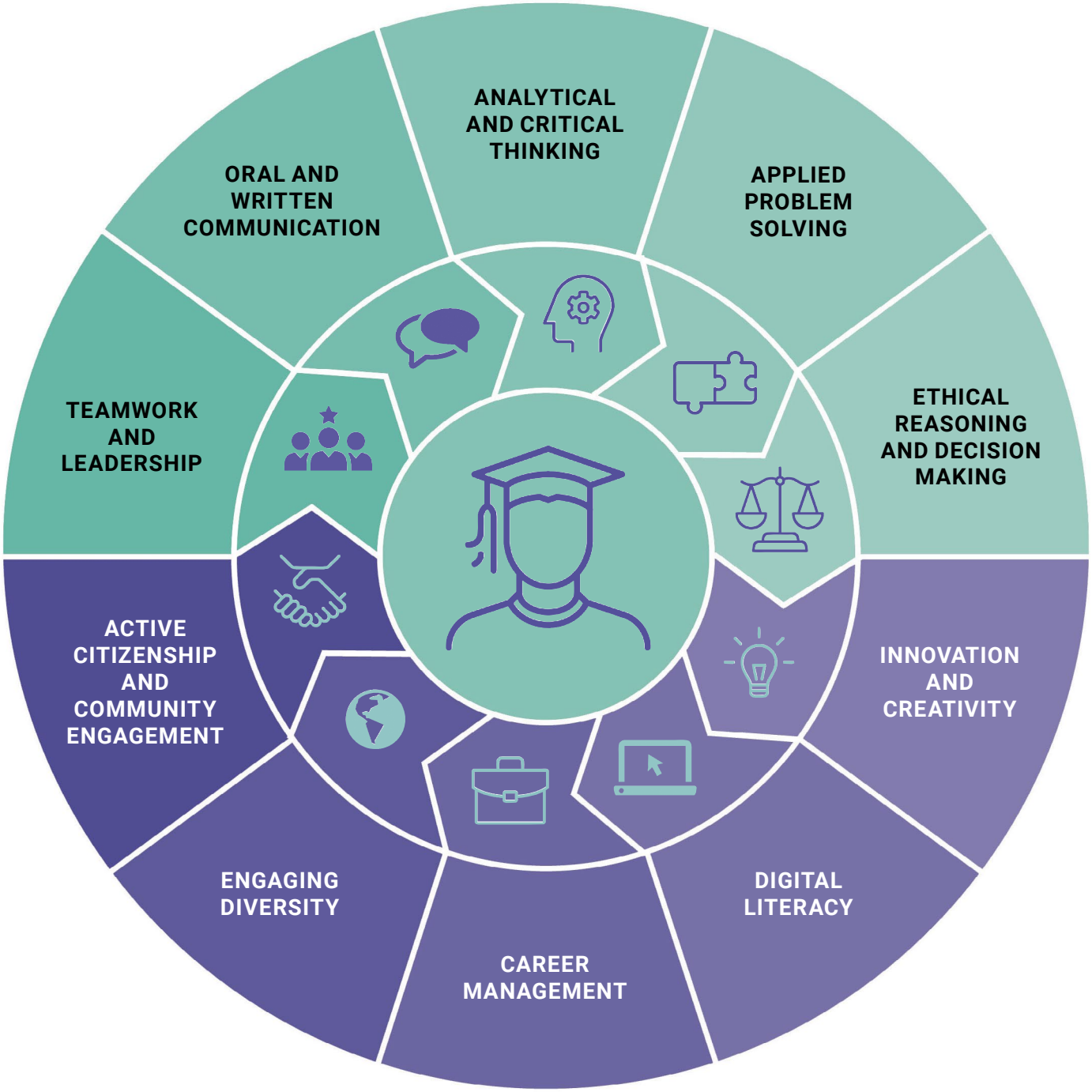
The dean appointed a faculty director for career readiness — separate from the college's career-services center — and working groups began figuring out how to develop a framework. Their first major step: the creation and definition of 10 core competencies that every liberal-arts student should develop in college. They include ethical decision making, career management, digital literacy, and applied problem solving.

For example, career management is "active engagement in the process of exploring possible careers, gaining meaningful experience, and building skills that help one excel after college." Those who are competent in career management are able to understand and identify their own values, interests, personality, skills, and strengths and "articulate how these characteristics, combined with and shaped by a liberal-arts education, lead to career success."

With the help of internal and external experts, the liberal-arts college created an online tool called RATE (reflect, articulate, translate, evaluate) to help students understand and actually connect those competencies to what they do in and out of the classroom.

Showing Students the Bridge

The University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts emphasizes that what students learn in humanities courses will set them up for long-term success.



Source: University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts

The goal is for students to use the RATE program throughout their time in college to think about a class, a club, or any experience and how — as well as why — it links back to one or more of the core competencies. Then, they practice how they would explain that when applying for a job or to graduate school.

"We emphasize translating the knowledge into a nonacademic context," Koerner says.

This is crucially important, because surveys nationwide have shown that humanities graduates are the least likely to see a connection between their college major and the jobs they take after earning their degree.

Humanities graduates are the least likely to see a connection between their college major and the jobs they take after earning their degree.

Students at Minnesota are introduced to RATE during their first year, and almost every student uses it at least once, says Anderson, the career-readiness director. For example, a student can pull up the program after attending a campus event and, with a few clicks, note which of the 10 competencies it is linked to, and then write a few paragraphs or make a video relating the experience. They're reminded via a prompt to make the explanation clear enough that if they return to it three or four years later, it still makes sense.

Those entering as first-year students are also required to take a one-credit course during the sophomore year, "Career Kickstarter," to learn how internships, study-abroad, and other experiential programs are connected to careers.

Faculty members play a key role in helping students make, and express, those connections between their studies and the competencies. The college has created an online RATE instructor guide and trained about 160 faculty members, or 20 percent of the college's total faculty, in using the tool, Koerner says.

It's really about making the implicit explicit, Anderson says. "Faculty typically do a team assignment, then move on. Instead, they need to encourage students to, for example, reflect and discuss their role on the team, and how they engaged with others and overcame challenges. Those are the moments that employers ask about."

Instructors can also apply for a readiness-teaching fellowship program — an interdisciplinary cohort that shares research and works together to better understand how to integrate the core competency framework in their courses.

Some faculty members have said that "it's not our job to train students to join the job market," Koerner says. "But we've overcome a lot of faculty resistance." He says if someone had asked him 10 years ago, he'd have considered it a great success to get 15 faculty members in a room to talk about career preparation for students. "And we have 160."

Sarah C. Chambers, a professor of history at Minnesota and chair of the history department, uses RATE with seniors who are doing their capstone projects.

"The closer students get to graduation, the more they make that connection" between course and career, she says. RATE and the core competencies are useful, she says, but only as part of a broader strategy "to prepare students for their careers, for being citizens, for being thoughtful, curious adults."

The Office of the Provost invests $500,000 annually in the career-readiness effort. Other higher-education institutions can license, at no cost, the competency names and definitions,

career-readiness guide, and graphics; RATE is available for $1,500 annually, and Anderson says, so far 10 universities have licensed it.

Results of the program are difficult to measure at this point, Koerner says, especially because the pandemic disrupted the college just as the program was taking off.

A survey of the liberal-arts college's 2024 graduates that asked whether their undergraduate education had helped develop the 10 core competencies showed slightly more students answering affirmatively in each category compared with a 2016 survey.

While the decline in humanities majors hasn't reversed, it has reached a plateau. Koerner says he believes the career-readiness efforts played a role.

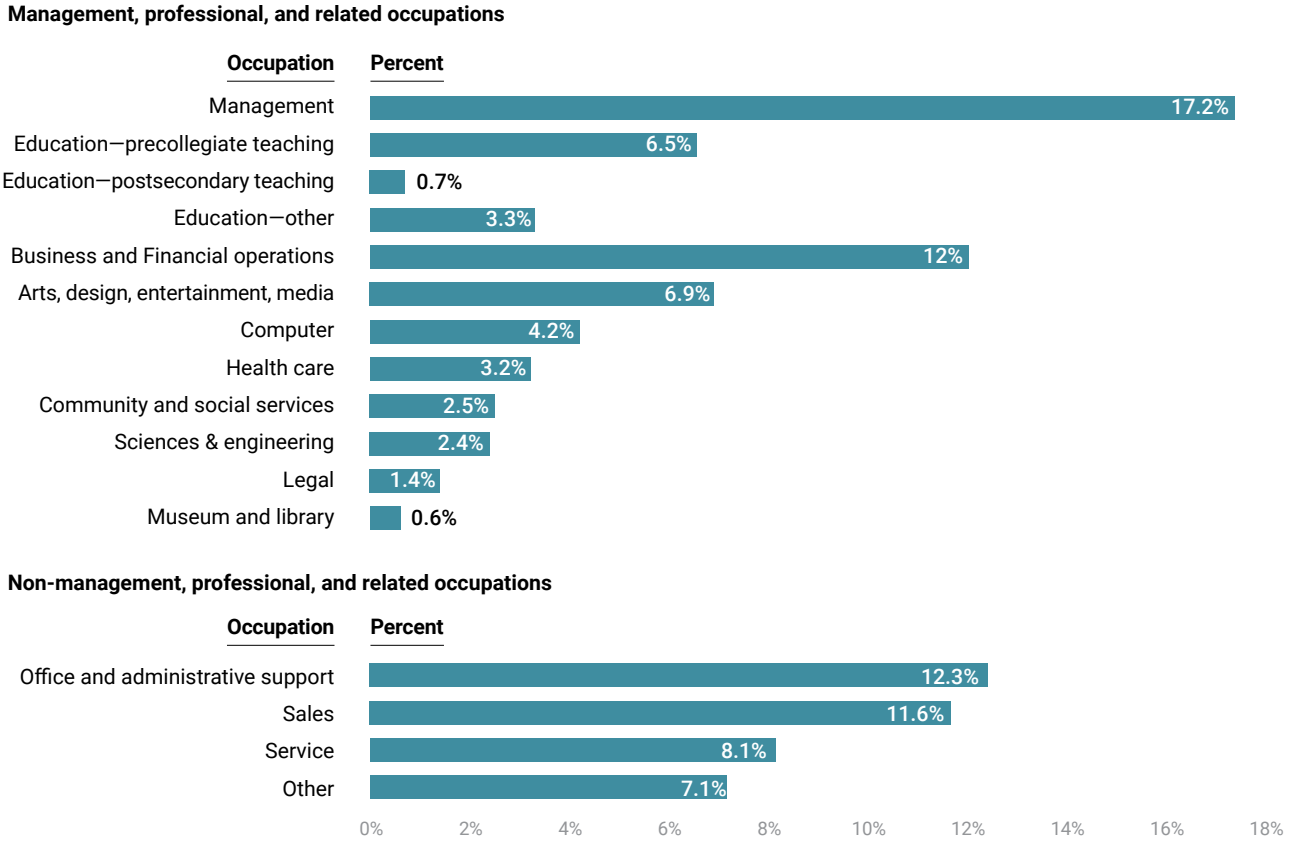
He also has anecdotal evidence of change. "A lot of parents at our orientation and recruitment events come to me personally and say, 'That's the first time I had somebody explain to me why my kid should be an English major. I'm now comfortable with that choice.'"

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS

Few colleges have the resources and support to develop the type of multipronged in-depth

Humanities Majors Have Many Options

Graduates with terminal bachelor's degrees in the humanities work in a range of fields, often as managers.



Source: Humanities Indicators, 2023. American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

program the University of Minnesota has, but many are finding creative ways to tackle the issue.

At LaGuardia Community College, in Queens, N.Y., departments have been phasing in a required first-year seminar that started in 2014. One aspect of these semester-long, three-credit seminars, which are capped at 25 students, is career preparation.

Jayashree Kamblé, a professor of English who has taught the seminar to liberal-arts majors for a number of years, requires her students to write a 1,000-word fantasy autobiography imagining they are 60 years old and looking back on their career.

"You don't have to be a STEM major to go into a STEM field. There's a place for arts and humanities in nearly every career."

"The idea is to get students to concretely imagine their future goals and their future self," she says. Students have to research their fictional career using the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other sources, as well as interview someone connected to it.

This is a way for them to "take ownership of their dreams and figure out how they're going to get there," she says.

It can be particularly challenging for community-college students, about one-third of whom receive Pell Grants and are first-generation, to consider pursuing a two-year — and perhaps even a four-year — degree in the humanities. And even if they want to, their families may oppose the choice, Kamblé says. The seminar offers students language to explain why they have chosen to major in, say, history or English.

The seminar can also include job shadowing and informational interviews with professionals, as well as physically visiting different offices on campus, such as the career center, library, and archives.

They learn that "'the fact that I love this doesn't mean that somehow I'll be living in a garret all my life. There are many options for me,'" says Kamblé. "And it opens up their eyes to thinking about things like networking, looking for internships — to understand that, as an English major, you are having fun while gathering skills that you will need for a career, that they're not wasting their time — because the world keeps telling them that."

A CAREER CENTER'S INVOLVEMENT

Emily Griffen, executive director of the Loeb Center for Career Exploration and Planning at Amherst College, received a call about three years ago from Austin D. Sarat, a professor of jurisprudence and political science at the college.

For quite a while the humanities had continued to flourish at Amherst, countering the national trend. But it dipped below 50 percent in 2018, an unheard-of low for this liberal-arts college, and then down to 40 percent in 2020, Griffen says. Since then, it has climbed back to about 45 percent.

Sarat told Griffen that he was hearing rumblings from arts and humanities faculty members who were concerned that the career office wasn't focused enough on helping students see viable career pathways within those disciplines.

"He told me, 'The best thing to do is get ahead of it and partner with us, as opposed to being scapegoated'" as "'somehow complicit in leading students away from these fields,'" she says. "It was an invitation to join forces with them, instead of ending up pitted against each other."

Griffen had already been thinking about

the career center's role in tackling job concerns facing humanities majors and had been studying other institutions' programs. In 2023, she and Sarat started Arts and Humanities in Action, a weeklong deep dive for about 15 students. Students meet Amherst humanities graduates from a variety of fields including technology and finance, and discuss skills and next steps with alumni, faculty members, and career-center staff.

"A central piece is decoding and practicing articulating the skills students build through arts and humanities study," Griffen says.

Claire Beougher, a junior at Amherst, went through the program when she was a freshman; after attending she changed her majors from political science, environmental science, and economics to political science and Russian.

"Even at a very liberal-arts school like Amherst, there's a sense that if you're majoring in the humanities you either have a lot of money or specifically decided to follow your heart rather than a lucrative career," she says. "That you're following your hobbies in some sense."

Growing up in Kalamazoo, Mich., Beougher knew she wanted a satisfying career that also provided financial security. She wasn't sure the humanities could offer that; she worried that she would have to spend her early career in a field she might not like to earn enough money to switch to a humanities-centered career.

But the program convinced her she was wrong. While her family has questioned her decision to switch to Russian, she says tips she learned in the program — about ways to explain to them why a humanities degree can be good for her future — have helped her in those conversations.

She now hopes to work in international humanitarian aid. "I learned you don't have to trade being financially secure with being emotionally fulfilled," she says. "I also learned you don't have to be a STEM major to go into a STEM field. There's a place for arts and humanities in nearly every career."

SPOTLIGHT: ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Putting Out a Welcome Mat

THE CHALLENGE: Bringing more students into humanities courses.

THE STRATEGY: Survey students about what's keeping them away from the field, then find ways to make it more attractive.

THE RESULT: Significant increases in humanities majors and minors.

JEFFREY J. COHEN was hired as the dean of humanities in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University in 2018 with the mandate to significantly expand his college's humanities division.

And he has succeeded. In 2008 the college had 2,607 humanities majors. The numbers started ticking up over the next decade, but "not nearly in stride with enrollment growth," Cohen says. By 2016 the number was 3,705; six years later that number had increased about 30 percent to 4,840, he says.

> "They rated humanities classes as being their absolute favorite. But they could not see a correlation between majoring in the humanities and a career."

So how did ASU manage that turnabout, especially during a time when other institutions struggled to increase their numbers?

One of the first things Cohen needed to do when he arrived was pinpoint, as much as possible, the barriers to students majoring in humanities. He hired a marketing company, which surveyed about 800 students in the college, asking, among other things, about their understanding of humanities, their feelings about humanities courses they had taken, and any impediments to taking such classes.

The university, a Hispanic-serving institution, enrolls 142,000 undergraduates, of whom 42 percent are first-generation, about 30 percent are Latino, and almost 4,000 are Native American. Cohen says the demographics of the humanities majors and minors reflect the university as a whole.

"It was absolutely fascinating," Cohen says of the survey. "They rated humanities classes as being their absolute favorite. But they could not see a correlation between majoring in the humanities and a career."

He realized that the humanities division — which includes the School of International Letters and Cultures, the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, and the department of English — needed to communicate a lot better about what it had to offer.

One of the first steps was to have the college's marketing and communications team create a website that emphasizes graduates' desire to change the world and connect their passion to

a career, and highlights stories about successful alumni who majored in the humanities.

"There had never been something that showed the joy and the adventure of the humanities," Cohen says. The website also has "all the information students need to explain to their parents why they're going to be an English major."

Other changes include two new courses and more internship opportunities. These initiatives started in the English department, which houses almost half of all humanities majors at ASU, and they will be phased in across all 32 humanities majors in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Since 2022, English majors must take an introductory course co-taught by three faculty members, typically from different humanities disciplines. The course usually takes on a broad theme; this year the theme is "wonder," taught by an assistant professor of film and media studies and two associate professors of English.

The course examines the way the word wonder has been used in different contexts over time and how it has shaped people's perceptions of the world. Students discuss wonder in horror, fantasy, inquiry, and communication. For example, the horror segment includes excerpts from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Stephen King's essay "Why We Crave Horror Movies."

Cohen chose the instructors for their dynamism. The goal is both to engage the students in the content immediately and to create connections among the professors and students, he says. The in-person class holds 120 students, who then break up into smaller sections.

"We want them to look around the room and see their community and know that these will be people they're traveling forward with as majors," Cohen says. "If the course works, those students are also our best ambassadors."

An added perk is that non-English majors can take the course, and some end up so intrigued that they decide to major in English.

In sophomore or junior year, students take a class called "Your Degree in the World," taught by Cohen and other faculty members. This is where students hear ASU humanities alumni tell their success stories.

In addition, Cohen promoted an adviser to the role of internship coordinator specifically for the English department. About 200 students, or 10 percent, per year received internships through the office. For those internships that aren't paid, the department tries to raise money to provide stipends.

Some faculty members have modified their courses to make them more accessible to everyone. Sometimes introductory courses, Cohen says, pile too much background information onto students rather than concentrate on the skills they need to succeed. And they end up being gatekeeping courses, rather than gateway ones.

Content is important, he says, but so is understanding "how do you stoke their curiosity? How do you get them to ask good questions? How do you equip them to do good research? How do you help them figure out what's true and what's not true? By concentrating on these kinds of basic humanities frames, the students are ready both for the major and whatever life they go off into."

All of these shifts are part of the same goal, Cohen says: "We had to open the door and put a welcome mat in front of it and actually invite them in, rather than being disappointed that students weren't showing up."

SECTION 4

Overcoming Obstacles

OVER THE PAST DECADE, those involved in supporting and promoting the humanities in higher education have recognized that major changes are needed to ensure the disciplines will continue to be a real option for all students. A variety of hurdles remain, however, for that kind of creativity and innovation to flourish in a broader and more sustainable fashion.

COLLECTING THE DATA

One barrier is just getting more data. While the National Center for Education Statistics collects a lot of information, "we would love to have studies that capture flows of a common set of people over time, instead of the data that only gives us snapshots over time," says Robert B. Townsend, who oversees the humanities, arts, and culture programs for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. "It would allow us to better see how people move from point A to point B."

That barrier has recently grown taller. As this report went to press, the future of the National Center for Education Statistics was in question. The Trump administration had abruptly canceled dozens of the center's research contracts and eliminated more than half of the staff positions at the Institute of Education Sciences, the division that houses the statistics center.

Unsure about the future status of the information the center collects, Townsend says he and his staff are downloading as many of its datasets as possible. "Assuming that at some point they could just get turned off

TAKEAWAYS

- More robust data is needed to assess the strengths and weaknesses in humanities programs.
- A two-year-old office in the National Endowment for the Humanities is working to fill that gap, but may be hampered by the Trump Administration.
- Colleges are beginning to tackle the barriers that keep underserved students out of the humanities.
- Community-college students face difficulty earning a bachelor's degree in a humanities field.

and would simply no longer become available, we'd at least like to be able to go back and look at the data that we have as of today," he says.

In theory, Townsend says, "we could construct our own data sets of all the departments that we interact with and then conduct our own surveys. But that's incredibly hard. Having a systematized, nationalized dataset that we can rely on as the starting point for other areas of research is just really critical for us."

Meanwhile, research on a national level — especially longitudinal studies, such as of career trajectories of humanities majors — has long been lacking. "We can guess at how earnings change over the course of graduates' careers by comparing younger to older grads, but we can't offer anything definite because we are looking at snapshots based on changing sample populations," Townsend says.

"Having a systematized, nationalized dataset that we can rely on as the starting point for other areas of research is just really critical for us."

Organizations representing specific humanities fields conduct their own surveys of faculty members in their disciplines. Education-consulting firms, advocacy organizations, and think tanks may do occasional studies. But it is the Academy of Arts and Sciences, with its Humanities Indicators, that offers the broadest and most objective insights into trends such as course participation, demand for majors, student demographics, and other insights on the overall health of the humanities in the United States. (See box, Page 49.)

Jason Rhody, senior director of engagement strategy at the Modern Language Association, echoing others, praises the Humanities Indicators for the information they provide. But he also notes that the equivalent ones for science and engineering, collected by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, "actually contextualize the global competitive education system, which helps make that rationale for funding. It helps situate the importance of sciences in a broader cultural context. And we just don't have anything quite as equivalent."

The collection of the science and engineering indicators is required under federal law, while humanities indicators are not.

One key question, for example: How many students are taking humanities classes even if they're not majoring or minoring in a humanities discipline? That information just isn't available, Townsend says.

One of the reasons the academy has conducted its Humanities Departmental surveys — five over the past 18 years — is "so we could get a handle on how many butts there are in seats in these different classes. Because there really is no other source of information," Townsend says.

Collecting information on second majors, which are often in a humanities field, is also haphazard, as noted in Section 1. Fewer than half of colleges that report majors to the National Center for Education Statistics report second majors.

In addition, little research exists, outside of the Humanities Departmental surveys, on the career paths of humanities Ph.D. students or humanities faculty members, including the shifting proportions of tenured and adjunct. That kind of data would provide important insight into an institution's investment in the humanities, Rhody says.

"If you water half a garden, you can't expect the whole thing to grow," he says. "If we're pre-

About the Humanities Indicators

THE American Academy of Arts and Sciences released its first Humanities Indicators in 2009.

"We wanted to figure out what data was available, put it together, and then hand it over to the NEH [National Endowment of the Humanities]," says Robert B.Townsend, who oversees the humanities, arts, and culture programs for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. But the NEH declined to house the indicators. Since then, the Mellon Foundation has stepped in and funds the staffing and research for the humanities indicators.

The Academy receives very little federal funding, Townsend says.

The indicators cover five categories: funding and research, higher education, K-12 education, public life, and the work force. They are not released on a consistent schedule, but Townsend says he tries to regularly update the most popular ones — such as trends in basic reading skills in K-12 and information on research funding and earnings — as often as possible.

The Academy gathers information from the state and federal government, higher education institutions, and other sources. It also conducts its own research, such as humanities departmental surveys, which, among other things, looks at demographics of humanities faculty and students. The first survey took place in 2007; the fifth will be released in April 2025.

The key questions the higher-education indicators answer are how the demand for humanities degrees has changed over time; what share of all academic degrees is awarded in the humanities; and the number of humanities degrees awarded in specific disciplines.

The numbers also provide a window into what the world looks like for humanities majors post-graduation, such as types of occupations and earnings for humanities majors with bachelor's degrees and advanced degrees.

One indicator can lead to another, Townsend says — for example, once the Academy released the national indicator on employment outcomes for humanities majors, he kept receiving requests for a state-by-state breakdown. The Academy published the state profiles indicator in 2023.

dominantly investing in full-time, tenure-track positions in other fields," that will continue to affect the humanities, no matter how many initiatives are proposed.

Humanities advocates are applauding some changes: In 2023, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) established an Office of Data and Evaluation — its first new office in about 15 years — to better understand the impact of its work and the field in general, says Hannah Alpert-Abrams, a senior program officer there.

While the NEH has evaluated and assessed its grant programs internally over the years, the new office will fund data collection and research projects to investigate the state and impact of humanities programs nationwide. This includes humanities in K-12 education, research and public programing — such as with museums and historic sites — as well as higher education.

"We would like to be a corrective for some misinformation going around about the humanities and what is happening," says Alpert-Abrams. "This discourse around the humanities crisis does not reflect what we see internally; we see all of our programs growing all of the time, and if anything we're racing to keep up with the state of the field in the humanities, not scrounging up the bits that are left."

Nonetheless, she says, "we do think that there is a gap in research in this space. We want to fund grounded research to understand

what's happening in the many fields that make up the humanities."

That would include looking at interdisciplinary humanities and people enrolled in humanities who are not necessarily majors. The plan, she says, is for the research to complement and ultimately be incorporated into the Humanities Indicators.

The office solicited feedback from the humanities community in developing the grants programs; three of the top five priorities included research on humanities education, humanities professions, and career outcomes for humanities students across multiple metrics. The first round of grants, worth approximately $600,000, will be issued in fiscal year 2026, Alpert-Abrams says.

The Trump administration's priorities may have an impact on the funding, she says, "but the current plan is to proceed with the grant program."

A DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS

Bringing in marginalized students, who typically have been less represented in humanities, is another concern. According to the American Academy's Humanities Indicators, in 2022, 37.5 percent of humanities bachelor's degrees were awarded to nonwhite students, double the share in 1997. Most of that growth is due to a sharp increase in Latino students, who accounted for almost half the students of color receiving humanities degrees in 2022.

But the increase is less an indication of a growing interest in humanities than it appears, Townsend says, since there was a substantial overall growth in students of color receiving bachelor's degrees during that time period.

As a result, the humanities are actually shrinking as a share of the degrees going to students of color. In 1997, the humanities accounted for 13 percent of bachelor's degrees earned by those students, but that figure had fallen to 8.6 percent by 2022.

A National Humanities Alliance report on serving underrepresented students identified four major barriers: curricula that seem out of touch and antiquated, students' concern about job prospects, a lack of faculty and student diversity, and a basic lack of understanding about what the humanities are.

The report included more than 200 responses from those involved in humanities education at two- and four-year colleges. Researchers chose not to define "historically underrepresented students" and let respondents define them as it applied to their own institutions. They included first-generation, Black, Latino, Native American and Pacific Islander, students from underserved K-12 schools, and those who had transferred from community colleges.

Some of the challenges are relevant to all humanities students but can be more pressing for traditionally marginalized students. For example, showing low-income students that a humanities degree can lead to a sustainable career is crucial.

"Our students come from families where the household income is often under $25,000 a year, and so financial consistency dogs all of them," says Jayashree Kamblé, a professor of English at LaGuardia Community College. "The ability to support themselves is a pressing concern."

Anissa Ince, a senior at Tuskegee University, a historically Black university in Alabama, had never heard of a humanities major when she was applying to colleges. She entered the university as an animal-science major.

"I come from a low-income community," Ince says. "I didn't really have that many options or role models." College was "mainly for having a sustainable income and providing for my family. That's what's most important to me, because I've seen my family struggle."

But a newly established global-humanities minor run by Rhonda Collier — a professor of English, chair of the department of modern languages, and a dynamic proselytizer for the field — changed that.

Ince minored in global humanities along with her animal-science major, which allowed her to study abroad five times — typically for a few weeks at a time.

"I'm grateful that I was informed about it my freshman year, " she says, adding that the program changed her college experience and broadened her vision of what her career might look like.

In 2023, the Modern Language Association received a $1.5-million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to recruit and retain humanities students and make them career ready, especially students of color, low-income and first-generation students. With that money, the association developed an initiative called MLA Pathways: Recruitment, Retention, and Career Readiness. The first round of grants was awarded in April 2024. The requirement, says Paula M. Krebs, executive director of the Modern Language Association, is that the programs be sustainable, not one-off events.

"You can do so much with $10,000," says Krebs, "If you're running a lab, you might buy one piece of equipment with that money, but humanities faculty members can develop programs for students with $10,000 that really shift what they're able to do with students and that can have a lasting impact."

As part of the Pathways program, the MLA is creating a toolkit this year that provides case studies and concrete steps in recruiting and retaining humanities students, says Rhody. The toolkit, he says, could be adopted across humanities disciplines and institutions.

COMMUNITY-COLLEGE TRANSFERS

Another way to bring more marginalized students into the humanities is by encouraging community-college students — overall a more diverse population than that at four-year colleges — to choose humanities majors when they transfer to a four-year institution.

When community-college students plan to continue eventually to a bachelor's degree in humanities, they are typically advised to go into a program on general studies or pursue an associate degree in liberal arts, according to a recent report from the Community College Research Center at Columbia University. Nationally, about 40 percent of associate degrees awarded by community colleges are in those two fields, but a very small percentage of recipients go on to earn a bachelor's in a humanities field, the report notes.

"If we're going to talk about revitalizing humanities education, we need to think about the role that community colleges can play."

"If we're going to talk about revitalizing humanities education, we need to think about the role that community colleges can play in that revitalization," says Susan Bickerstaff, a senior research associate at the research center and co-author of the report.

That will take a multipronged effort that includes strengthening humanities courses and majors at community colleges, creating a more effective transfer process between two- and four-year colleges, and better explaining and promoting the humanities and the careers the major can lead to.

Many community-college faculty members are eager to find a way that humanities courses can serve as "an on-ramp for students to study the humanities and not just a suite of general-education courses that they teach to a whole bunch of business majors," Bickerstaff says.

Starting in 2021, the Community College

Humanities at One STEM-Focused Black College

PURDUE UNIVERSITY'S Cornerstone program, discussed in Section 2, has caught on elsewhere. The Teagle Foundation, which supports the humanities in higher education, has so far funded similar programs at 70 colleges nationwide.

One of those is Tuskegee University, a STEM-oriented historically Black college in Alabama.

It changed its entry-level English courses to create a common theme among the classes, aligned "with our legacy as a historically Black college in rural Alabama," says Rhonda Collier, a professor of English and chair of the department of communication, modern languages, and philosophy.

For example, students are taught both Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and *A Tempest*, a postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's play by the Martiniquais author Aimé Césaire. Also in 2022, Tuskegee began a global humanities minor, which Collier directs. Students have to take two years of a foreign language and some combination of courses including music, philosophy, history, and African literature, and complete a capstone project. They are also encouraged to study abroad — typically for around two weeks. Many students have done so more than once.

The initial goal was to enroll 50 students in the minor; just two years after it began, it has 75 students, Collier says. The opportunity to travel to another country is a big draw, but that presents a challenge: Since many students are low income, Collier is often scrambling for funds to sponsor the trips

But for Collier, it's all worth it — she sees the study of humanities as particularly necessary at an HBCU.

"Humanities are so important to remind Black America that there has always been a human at the center of the Black experience, no matter how history has written us," she says.

Kennedy Spiller, a senior at Tuskegee, says the entire experience changed her life. She started college majoring in animal science with the aim of becoming a veterinarian — Tuskegee has a well-known College of Veterinary Medicine. But after doing seven travel-abroad programs — including a semester in Taiwan — and learning more about climate change and sustainable agriculture, she switched her major to plant science.

After graduation, she hopes to join the Peace Corps — something she learned about through the global humanities program — to work on food-security issues and then go on to graduate school.

"I learned how to structure a community-service project. I learned how to do irrigation and about planting, and even about my local community here at Tuskegee by being a global humanities minor," she says. "It taught me how to be a citizen of the world."

Research Center collaborated with the Michigan Community College Association as part of a project in that state, Strengthening MiHumanities. The goal was to build on previous statewide efforts by creating roadmaps for students in four majors with relatively strong enrollments — communication, English, history, and theater — to move on more easily to a bachelor's program.

"There's not typically a robust pathway to a humanities degree program at the four-year institution," Bickerstaff says. "Community colleges can definitely get students excited about these pathways, but they have to have

transfer partners who are willing to work with them."

She says if students enter a four-year college and find out their credits don't align, then "they're spending money that they shouldn't have to spend, and it's discouraging to retake all these courses. So then maybe you become a business major."

The report recommended, among other things: aligning course numbering, content, and learning objectives between community colleges and four-year institutions; providing high-quality advising to help students understand and take the correct courses for their desired transfer destination; and offering tailored support for students after they transfer.

The Michigan study, along with a three-year research project on community-college transfers in the City University of New York system, also note that community-college faculty members and advisers often steer students away from considering a bachelor's degree in a humanities discipline out of concern that it won't lead to a well-paying career.

While this can be true at four-year colleges as well, such a "well meaning" attitude can be especially intense at community colleges, Bickerstaff says. For many good reasons, "there's a lot of pressure on the institution to help students have a pathway to a middle-class job and to do that as efficiently as possible."

The University of South Carolina at Union, a two-year college that is part of the University of South Carolina system, has worked hard to engage students in its humanities programs. The college has a strong pre-nursing program connected to the University of South Carolina at Aiken. The pre-nursing students are required to take two humanities electives in addition to their core classes.

To make the courses more relevant to the prospective nurses, some of the electives are now tailored to include aspects of medicine, says Maggie Aziz, associate dean for academic and student affairs and a professor of sociology at the Union campus.

For example, a Latin-American Studies course that explores the region through film includes units on narrative-based medicine and clinical empathy. One on World Literature incorporates discussions about religion and the afterlife as a comforting element for patients, Aziz says.

The college also has a large dual-enrollment program with more than 10 regional high schools. Courses are taught primarily by Union faculty members on and off the campus. The program has increased enrollment enough in the humanities that the college can expand its programs; since 2022, it has hired three tenure-track professors.

"Community colleges can definitely get students excited about these pathways, but they have to have transfer partners who are willing to work with them."

Gaining more humanities majors is great, but ensuring all students are exposed to and engaged with the field is even more important, Aziz says.

And it seems to be working. Every semester, before classes start, Aziz sends out a list of courses with low enrollment, so advisers can encourage students to take them. Almost every semester, the majority of on-campus religious studies and philosophy courses are on the list.

"But this spring semester, when I made this list, none of those classes were on it," she says. "And that's a win in our book."

SPOTLIGHT: PACE UNIVERSITY

‘Creating Citizen Artists’

THE CHALLENGE: Historically, it has been difficult to attract minority students to the humanities.

THE STRATEGY: Create an interdisciplinary major that speaks to their experiences.

THE RESULT: Half the students in the new major identify as African American, Latino, or Asian American/Pacific Islander.

PACE UNIVERSITY, in Manhattan, took a very direct path to recruiting underrepresented students. In 2021 it started a new major: “Writing for Diversity and Equity in Theater and Media.” S. Brian Jones, a writer, artist, and arts educator, was brought in to lead the new program as assistant dean for diversity and equity in the arts.

“DEI wasn’t just a hot topic to fill a quota. It was truly a big part of the program.”

Initially, the major, funded by a grant from the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation, was supposed to be housed in the university’s Sands College of Performing Arts and focused largely on theater and theater production, Jones says. But after the 2020 murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis ignited protests worldwide, “the university looked at, ‘How can we encapsulate what’s going on right now?’” he says, and decided to integrate more humanities and social sciences.

Despite the Trump administration’s crackdown on programs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, Jones says PACE has no intention of changing the name of the major.

Currently, 25 students are in the interdisciplinary major, which is housed in the English department. Among the 49 credits required are courses on creative writing for television, film, and theater; courses on gender, race, and class; and an introduction to critical race theory and ethnicity. The major also includes a focus on community engagement and social justice, numerous guest speakers, and a required capstone project.

About half of the program’s 25 current majors identify as African American, Latino, or Asian American/Pacific Islander; the other half identify as white.

“The ideal is that we are creating citizen artists,” Jones says.

Cambria Martin, who graduated from Pace in May 2024, is the first alumna of the program. A first-generation Mexican American who grew up in California, she says she was “looking for something where I could incorporate all facets of myself,” which she hadn’t found while doing theater in her high school or community.

“I grew up very shy and I felt it was easy to

PACE U

Students with Pace U.'s theater program pose during a celebration of the Lunar New Year.

put me in a corner and not notice me," she says. When she joined the Pace major in her sophomore year, it was different; she had a mentor and a cohort.

"Finding that program and having someone like Brian guide me helped me feel more sane and centered," she adds. "I wasn't just a commodity to discuss diversity and inclusion, and DEI wasn't just a hot topic to fill a quota. It was truly a big part of the program — that all of us have important voices and all of us should be in the room."

Since graduation, Martin has stage-managed two shows off Broadway and is interested in working in arts administration and playwriting. Her ultimate goal, she says, "is to have a production company incorporating film, television, and theater for stories that I wanted to see as a kid and or a lot of us still really strive to see in the media."

COMMENTARY

How to Rescue Your Slumping Humanities Program

BY LEONARD CASSUTO

WHEN HE WAS PRESIDENT of the Modern Language Association, Michael Bérubé described the myriad challenges facing doctoral education as "a seamless garment of crisis." That was 2013. I'm reluctant to use the word "crisis" to describe problems we've faced for more than 50 years, but the seamless-garment metaphor remains spot on in 2025.

Shrinking financial support for the humanities has affected the size and scope of graduate study in those fields. That issue is unavoidably linked to undergraduate education, because it hardly makes sense to admit graduate students into humanities programs — or hire new faculty members in those fields — if there are no undergraduates to teach. So if graduate education in the humanities is going to survive and thrive, we have to fix the problem of declining undergraduate enrollments in our courses and majors.

Everyone is looking for success stories to emulate. Washington University at St. Louis is such a story. A healthy and wealthy university by any measure, Wash U. hasn't escaped the general malaise gripping the humanities across higher ed. The number of English majors, according to the department, had been steadily declining at the university but reached an alarming low in 2018 when it dipped below 100, out of more than 7,000 undergraduates.

It "freaked us out," recalled William J. Maxwell, a professor of English and then the department's director of undergraduate studies. Realization dawned: "We weren't paying enough attention to this."

The department embarked upon "a conscious project to turn this around." Faculty members had to go "above the treetops," said Vincent Sherry, who was chair at the time. "Then we could see the department as something that belongs to all of us." Their strategy is working and just waiting to be adapted across the humanities and beyond. The number of English majors at Wash U. has risen steadily for seven years and nearly doubled since that 2018 low. I visited the campus, interviewed faculty members and students, and found that English is now thriving there at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The number of English majors at Wash U. has nearly doubled since a 2018 low.

How are they doing it? Via the following four interwoven themes.

Build on your strengths. The department started with the twin observations that (a) its creative-writing offerings were popular;

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and (b) the creative-writing professors were well-regarded and supported a successful M.F.A. program. "We wanted to emphasize the importance of our writing program in the context of traditional English education," said Maxwell, so the department added an undergraduate concentration in creative writing, and another in publishing.

The change didn't simply amount to lashing a creative-writing life raft to a sinking literary boat. Instead, said Maxwell, the department "reconceived what the boat is." The new concentrations weren't just add-ons; they were woven into the department's curriculum and helped change its teaching culture.

Some English departments keep creative writing and literary study separate, but "there isn't a divide between scholars and creative writers" here, said David Schuman, director of creative writing. Both groups know that they strengthen the department together, he said, and they are part of a "common cause." The fact that writing "is so present in the major now," added Maxwell, "makes me do different things as a teacher. I've developed new assignments, like asking students to write in the style of a writer they read."

To change its pedagogical focus, the faculty changed its values.

The faculty also updated the traditional literature-based English major. Students still take required historical surveys, but the department redesigned the courses to globalize them and also added a minority and global-literature requirement (which can be fulfilled by different courses). These changes helped to attract a more-diverse population of interested students to the major.

Actively recruit top students. The changed curriculum didn't attract students by itself. Sherry, the former chair, helped develop a strategy of direct outreach to strong students. "Talented kids are used to being recruited," said Maxwell, so the department developed a plan to invite them to be English majors.

The first step involved contacting faculty members who teach first-year seminars and writing courses in a department other than English. They were asked for the names of their top five students along with, crucially, a few details of work they did in class. Each first-year student then received a personalized email, a practice that continues today. "We ask them: Have you considered majoring in English?" said the current chair, Abram Van Engen.

Most have not. "We suggest that there's a door that they can walk through" to consider a major or minor, said Melanie Micir, the department's director of graduate studies. And many choose to walk through it.

Talk about the employment outlook. But most students don't cross that threshold without checking with their families. The decision to major in English has to clear "the hurdle of parental perception," said Van Engen. Parents have seen the flood of articles arguing that a humanities major is a ticket to the unemployment line. Easily available data from the Humanities Indicators project (for example, data on the employment status and earnings of humanities majors with a bachelor's degree) show that to be a canard. But that fact doesn't matter if parents believe their negative impression to be true. Van Engen recalled "a student whose parents wouldn't pay for her college education if she majored in English."

"Giving those students an answer is important," said Van Engen. The department therefore created fact sheets for prospective majors to show to their parents. "Students have an appetite to write," said Van Engen.

"They want to create stories, read stories, know stories." The statistics show that strong story skills lead to good jobs. By better communicating that fact, the department shows those skills to be worth paying for.

The department backs up the statistics it collects with its own career-liaison work. Professors invite the department's alumni to share how they shape a career with a humanities degree. Such close-to-home stories, along with articles from national media outlets, Van Engen said, help students and their families to see the value of the humanities in the world.

Put your best teachers in front of your least-experienced students in introductory classes. The value of a humanities program begins with the instruction that students receive — and to maximize it, the department accomplished perhaps its most profound change in practice.

Professors are socialized to love their upper-level teaching best, and that work typically confers the most prestige. At Wash U., the English department agreed to put its best teachers in front of first- and second-year students. (Said Van Engen: "You don't build a major around juniors." You have to pitch the major to students sooner than that.)

To change its pedagogical focus, the faculty changed its values. Rewards (such as a departmental teaching award) provided recognition and shifted the prevailing value system. Teaching survey courses and first-year seminars may be viewed elsewhere as a chore, but here, Van Engen said, people "find it to be an honor."

This upstream achievement has had downstream impact. Students talk to each other, and they spread the news. And on the faculty level, "the more we grow, the more the dean gives us new hires," the chair said. In the last five years, the department has hired more than 10 people to the tenure track — how many other humanities departments can say the same?

This commitment to teaching introductory courses extends to the department's hiring practices. "We ask how a candidate will appear in the classroom to first- and second-year students," said Van Engen. "Can they generate excitement around literature? This matters in our deliberation."

Together, those actions have built community. They've resulted in a culture of personal connection across the department that includes more teaching collaborations (both faculty pairs and professor/graduate-student partnerships) and more co-curricular gatherings that draw professors, graduate students, and undergraduates, separately and together. There are ghost-story readings on Halloween, and an undergraduate club called the Creative Writing Café combines writing workshops with appearances by visiting writers. There's also an undergraduate literary magazine that is supervised by graduate students. At a popular annual event, faculty members choose a book from their shelves and inscribe it with a note. English majors and minors come to the gathering and leave with a book. "It's an invitation to cross-generational connection," said Micir, and a way for students to get to know their instructors outside the classroom.

It's also a way to build ties among people, not just to a discipline. Professors wanted to create not just a major but "a place where students can go to feel that they're part of a community," said Schuman, the department's creative-writing director. In this spirit, doughnuts and coffee draw faculty members and students for an informal social hour every Friday morning.

What does all of that mean for doctoral education? From this thick social-root system branches a vibrant and thriving graduate program that benefits from the communal health and spirit of the department as a whole. Bérubé was right about the seamless garment. Everything in an academic depart-

ment is connected — and not just the problems. The good stuff also connects, and the success of the graduate program in English at Wash U. shows that.

"Graduate students are not siloed here," said Micir, its graduate director. Most of the department's research and writing groups — on subjects as varied as Kierkegaard and writing pedagogy — are initiated and run by graduate students, she said, and professors regularly participate. Graduate students serve on hiring committees, and the department solicits their input on job candidates who visit the campus. Graduate-student representatives are also invited to participate at major department meetings when collective concerns are identified.

Students value curricular culture, not just curriculum itself.

The department has created faculty committees specifically for the professional development of its graduate students: on job placement, on a summer digital-humanities workshop, and on a robust mentorship program that includes paid internships. "We encourage this," Micir said. "We want to take graduate students seriously as professionals" and allow them to customize the program to meet their own needs. The students see that: "You're not put on a train track from point A to point B," as one student put it.

The support is also financial. Every student I spoke with commended the department's commitment to equity: Students don't compete for financial opportunities at Wash U. They're all admitted with six years of guaranteed financial support. "We try to build a collegial environment where all have their needs met by the program," said Micir, "so they can focus on their studies, have funds for travel and conferences and archives, and compete for academic prizes without feeling as though their food and shelter depend on it." There are selective awards that students compete for, but they're not tied to financial support. That promotes collegiality and peer support among graduate students. That atmosphere "was one of the top-selling points of the Ph.D. program for me," said Charlotte Fressilli, who received her degree this past summer.

Kristin Emanuel, a fourth-year Ph.D. student who also holds an M.F.A., appreciates the convergence of creative writing and critical research in the department. "I knew there would be a place for me," she said. She also values the structured interaction at monthly meetings devoted to graduate-student concerns, with panels on specific topics such as how to get the most out of a mentor relationship. This "student space" gave Emanuel a "sense of larger community" that unites individual cohorts.

Kate Guadagnino, who just received her M.F.A., said her professors treat her like a peer. They would ask, "How's your teaching going? What stories did you put on your syllabus?" As a result, Guadagnino said, "I forged relationships that will last after my official relationship with Wash U. ends."

Students can't join a curriculum, but they can join a community. On both the graduate and undergraduate levels, the example of Wash U. shows that students value curricular culture, not just curriculum itself. "The more ways that you create community," says Van Engen, "the more the community attracts people." They say, "I want to be part of it."

That community has to have values. You can't pretend to care about teaching — you actually have to walk the walk. Or as Maxwell put it: "It's a matter of letting students know you give a shit about their education and the major."

Rescuing the humanities isn't going to be easy. Every department could identify its own strengths and devise a plan for how to translate those commitments into a community that attracts students. The English department at Wash U. shows it can be done.

Leonard Cassuto is a professor of English at Fordham University who writes regularly for The Chronicle *about graduate education. His newest book is* Academic Writing as if Readers Matter*, from Princeton University Press. He co-wrote, with Robert Weisbuch,* The New Ph.D.: How to Build a Better Graduate Education.

A Final Word

MANY COLLEGES across higher education are determined that their students will have the opportunity to engage in the humanities — whether for one course or an entire major — in a way that, at a minimum, challenges them. And maybe even changes their perspectives or their lives.

"There is incredibly interesting work going on in the humanities among educators," says Edward Balleisen, vice provost for interdisciplinary studies and a professor of history and public policy at Duke University. They "embrace a variety of contexts and approaches that excite students and educate them well and set them up for success in many different potential avenues."

Variety is the key word. Some institutions, such as Purdue University, are focusing on revitalizing first-year required courses to inspire students right off the bat with "Transformative Texts." Others, such as the University of Arizona, have created a new major, public and applied humanities, that mandates students take a quarter of their courses in one of 11 other fields, including fashion studies, business administration, and engineering.

These are two examples, but not isolated ones. Paula M. Krebs, executive director of the Modern Language Association, says in the fall of 2024 she received an unprecedented 15 invitations from colleges to speak on forums and at other events. Most were from colleges that "have decided to double down on the humanities and bring in people from the outside to talk about the best practices for increasing enrollment," she says. "I haven't seen that kind of interest before from schools as varied as Kansas and Wyoming and Virginia Commonwealth and Vanderbilt."

Of course, many colleges, especially community colleges, are fighting for resources, support, and time to step back from daily life to think more holistically about a specific discipline.

In addition, a desire to turn around a humanities division requires administrative and collegial support and usually a dynamic dean or faculty member who is willing to push through the many obstacles that can crop up.

There are challenges on the national level as well. Colleges would like to see more data collected about the humanities fields, including more information on double majors and minors that include humanities disciplines, or the changing demographics of faculty members. Such information can help administrators and others better understand the landscape and where the barriers are.

Many are also worried about the impact of the Trump administration's priorities in higher education on data collection and other areas that could affect some of the progress that has been made in the humanities.

But, as this report shows, progress has indeed been made, most substantively, perhaps, in understanding the need to connect what students learn in the humanities with what employers want.

In 2018, the Strada Institute published a report, "Robot-Ready," that found employers were increasingly seeking skills that "encompass liberal arts and technical learning," but that "the vast majority of high schools and colleges aren't adapting quickly enough to the change, leaving their students increasingly unprepared for the job market."

Almost seven years later, colleges are still too slow to adapt, but the conversation has clearly changed, says Andrew Hanson, Strada's senior director of research and an author of the report. Arguments that college

is valuable no matter what, he says, or that liberal arts and STEM are on two opposing teams, are breaking down "to a more nuanced conversation about the recipe for success." That recipe includes a combination of liberal arts and technical learning with more emphasis on hybrid and experiential learning.

"Part of it is survival," he says, "but it's also recognizing opportunities to lead to some really positive change within institutions."

Further Reading and Resources

READING

"Challenging and Confronting: The Role of Humanities in Fostering Critical Thinking, Cultural Competency and an Evolution of Worldview in Enabling Education," by Lydia Edwards and Brendan Ritchie, *Student Success*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 10-20. (2022).

"Expanding Access to Undergraduate Humanities Education: Models and Strategies," by Scott Muir, National Humanities Alliance (2024).

"Health Humanities Baccalaureate Programs in the United States and Canada," by Erin Gentry Lamb, Sarah L. Berry, and Therese Jones. Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine (April 2021).

"Medical Students' Exposure to the Humanities Correlates With Positive Personal Qualities and Reduced Burnout: A Multi-Institutional U.S. Survey," by Salvatore Mangione, Chayan Chakraborti, Giuseppe Staltari et al., *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, Volume 33, 628–634 (2018).

"The State of the Humanities Circa 2022," by Robert B. Townsend and Norman Bradburn, *Daedalus*, Volume 151, Issue 3 (Summer 2022).

"STEM Careers and the Changing Skill Requirements of Work," by David Deming and Kadeem Noray, Harvard Kennedy School Working Papers No. RWP19-025 (August 19, 2019).

RESOURCES

Academy of the Arts & Sciences

Humanities Indicators: Includes data on enrollments, the occupations and earnings of college graduates with a terminal bachelor's degree, the mix of faculty members teaching in humanities departments, and more.

Modern Language Association

MLA Pathways: Recruitment, Retention, and Career Readiness: Offers models of humanities programs that are thriving by making changes to meet students' needs.

National Endowment for the Humanities

Office of Data and Evaluation: Provides posts on data and evidence-based guidance on the impact of its grants.

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