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Smoothing Pathways to Transfer in the Humanities

A Report on the Strengthening Michigan Humanities Project

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Smoothing Pathways to Transfer in the Humanities

This report describes the rationale, goals, and activities of the Strengthening Michigan Humanities (MiHumanities) project, an effort led by the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) and funded by the Mellon Foundation. The project is designed to strengthen community college transfer pathways in four humanities fields—communication, English, history, and theater—by identifying and using promising strategies to connect community college students to programs of study in these areas and by increasing coordination and curricular alignment between two- and four-year institutions. We analyze state administrative data collected by the Michigan Education Data Center¹ to describe statistics and trends in community college student course enrollments, transfer, and bachelor’s degree completion in a wide array of humanities fields, including the four Strengthening MiHumanities disciplines, and the liberal arts. [\(See an infographic presenting many of these results on pages 8-9.\)](#) We also summarize findings from interviews with faculty, staff, and students to highlight promising approaches to strengthening humanities transfer outcomes.²

Humanities in Community Colleges: Coherent Pathways or a Patchwork of Courses?

The study of humanities in higher education offers students and society many benefits. Students who take coursework or pursue degrees in the humanities develop skills in critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, and they are exposed to humanistic perspectives on ethics, civic engagement, and self-knowledge. The skills and knowledge they gain are valuable in the labor market and beyond (Deming, 2017; Edmondson et al., 2020; Finley, 2021). Bachelor’s degree holders in humanities fields are employed in a range of occupations, with the largest shares of students going into management and professional positions, business and finance, education, and sales (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-a). While average earnings among humanities bachelor’s degree holders are slightly lower than those of the average bachelor’s degree recipient, they far outpace the earnings of workers with only a high school diploma (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-b). Beyond the individual employment and earnings returns to bachelor’s degrees in the humanities, there are also large and positive social returns. These include increased democratic participation and civic engagement, greater understanding of cultural heritages, and boosts to creative and innovative thinking in both the public and private sectors (Holm et al., 2015). However, despite these benefits, the number and share of bachelor’s and graduate degrees conferred in humanities fields have been declining over the past decade, and both academic humanities programs and smaller liberal arts colleges themselves have seen closure and consolidation (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-c; Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2019).

Despite strong individual employment and earnings returns to bachelor’s degrees in the humanities as well as large positive social returns, the number and share of bachelor’s and graduate degrees conferred in humanities fields have been declining nationally over the past decade.

Community colleges are often overlooked in the broader discussion of the role of the humanities in higher education and what institutions can do to increase access to and enrollment in humanities fields (Pippins & Belfield, 2019; Pippins et al., 2019). Yet community colleges serve a large and diverse pool of potential candidates for humanities bachelor's degree programs. This is particularly important to broad-access four-year institutions, many of which have struggled to maintain enrollments overall and in humanities programs, especially in recent years. Because these institutions are often incentivized to recruit transfer students to help fill seats in upper-level courses vacated by their own students who do not persist after their first year or who transfer to another institution, community colleges' potential to broaden engagement with the humanities should not be underestimated. Moreover, as compared to the broader college-going population, a greater proportion of community college students are low-income and first-generation college students, students with minoritized racial/ethnic identities, and English learners (Bergey et al., 2018). Community colleges also serve large numbers of returning adult students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). The diversity of community college students thus provides distinct opportunities for creating rich learning environments, particularly in humanities classrooms, and it positions community colleges as leaders in creating a more equitable and inclusive society (Edgecombe, 2019). To the extent that community colleges can interest students in further study of humanities, they also have the potential to enhance the diversity of scholars and professionals working in humanities fields and to defy the common stereotype that the humanities are for more privileged student groups.

Typically, community college students aspiring to transfer into a humanities major are advised to enroll in a general studies or a liberal arts associate of arts degree program, broadly conceived programs that attract students with interests in many different fields as well as those who may be undecided about their academic interests or career goals. General studies/liberal arts accounts for about 40% of associate degrees awarded by community colleges nationally (authors' calculation using 2019 data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS]), yet only a very small percentage of these students go on to earn a bachelor's degree in a humanities field. Unfortunately, general studies/liberal arts community college students typically encounter a patchwork of courses that do not constitute a coherent learning experience in the humanities or other fields. Rather than deeply engaging with learning outcomes that would set the foundation for continued study in a chosen field, students in these associate degree programs select a given number of courses under a set of distribution requirements across arts and science subject areas (Bailey et al., 2015). Because general studies/liberal arts programs serve as a catch-all for many students, faculty and administrators at community colleges often have few mechanisms for tracking which majors various transfer-intending students aim to pursue, which then makes it difficult for faculty members and advisors to provide field-specific support or resources. This incoherence can lead to student disengagement and may provide little opportunity to excite students about pursuing bachelor's degrees in the humanities.

The diversity of community college students provides distinct opportunities for creating rich learning environments, particularly in humanities classrooms, and it positions community colleges as leaders in creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

Incoherence in community college general studies and liberal arts programs can lead to student disengagement, which may limit opportunities to excite students about pursuing bachelor's degrees in the humanities.

These challenges are compounded by misalignment between two- and four-year humanities programs and a resulting loss of credits during the transfer process (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). While it is difficult to measure how many credits are transferred and applied to community college students' bachelor's degree programs, Fink et al. (2018) found, using data from two states, that community college transfer students who complete a bachelor's degree do so with an average of 27–29 excess credits, the equivalent of an additional full-time year of coursework.

To address these challenges, colleges across the country are redesigning how they operate by implementing broad reforms based on the guided pathways framework (CCRC, 2021b), an approach that emphasizes the goal of bringing more coherence to generic and undefined programs like general studies and liberal arts. A leading principle of the guided pathways framework is to “start with the end in mind”—to help students explore and connect to a high-quality college program of study that interests them and that is associated with their career goals. To boost student recruitment and early momentum, colleges implementing guided pathways reforms have focused on reimagining new student onboarding to prioritize students' connection to a program in a field that interests them (Jenkins & Lahr, 2022). Based on their goals, the college helps students develop a personalized program plan, which for transfer students includes specific courses and other milestones required to enter a baccalaureate program with junior standing in a major.

To do this work successfully, community colleges must work with partner institutions to create major-specific program maps and simultaneously build and strengthen student onboarding practices. Many colleges in Michigan have been pursuing guided pathways reforms with support from the MCCA. In 2020, the Strengthening MiHumanities project convened faculty and administrators from two- and four-year institutions in Michigan to work toward these goals with respect to humanities disciplines.

The Michigan Context and the Strengthening MiHumanities Project

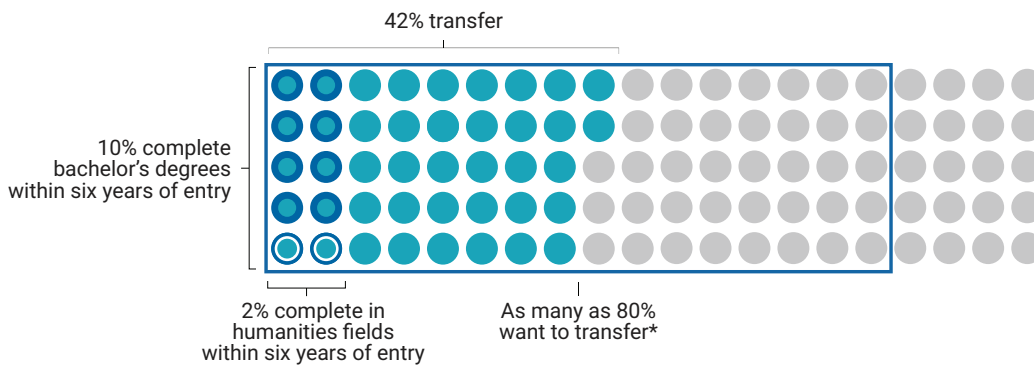
The opportunities and challenges to improve transfer in the humanities in Michigan are similar to those identified nationally (see infographic on pages 8-9). Nearly half of associate degrees awarded in Michigan are in general studies/liberal arts. More than half of Michigan transfer students take community college courses (excluding English composition) in humanities fields of study, and that proportion increases to more than three fourths if English composition—the most commonly enrolled course in a humanities field of study—is included (see box on page 5 on English Composition I and II).³ While only 14% of bachelor’s degrees conferred in Michigan are in a humanities field, community colleges’ contribution to bachelor’s degree production in the humanities is significant: Fifty-five percent of Michigan bachelor’s degree completers in the humanities started at a community college.

However, rates of transfer and bachelor’s degree completion among students who begin at a community college—in general and in the humanities specifically—are inequitable and quite low. While as many as 80% of new community college students across the country aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree, only 42% of incoming community college students in Michigan ever transfer to a four-year institution, and only 10% complete a bachelor’s degree within six years of entry.⁴ Moreover, in Michigan, Black and Hispanic students make up 23% of community college enrollment but only 12% of students who transfer and complete a bachelor’s degree in humanities fields (and they comprise only 11% of bachelor’s degree completers in any field). Fewer than 2% of Michigan community college entrants complete a bachelor’s degree in a humanities field within six years of entry; this percentage increases to about 5% among community college entrants who ever transferred vertically to a four-year college.⁵ While Black and Hispanic students are just as likely as their White peers to take a humanities course within their first year of study, they are 11 and 6 percentage points less likely, respectively, to take humanities



4 in 5
bachelor's degree completers in Michigan have taken a course at a community college

Michigan Community College Transfer and Completion



Note. Michigan data are for the 2009-2014 entry cohorts. *Nationally representative survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics have indicated that 81% of entering community college students intend to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011, Table 1-A).

courses that fulfill general education requirements at institutions in Michigan that participate in the Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA).⁶ Despite substantial enrollments, early completion of community college humanities coursework does not appear to be a strong signal of future transfer and completion of humanities bachelor's degrees. Michigan community college students who complete English composition or other transferable humanities coursework are only marginally (3%–4%) more likely to complete a bachelor's degree in a humanities field compared to community college students overall (about 2% of whom complete such a degree). When English composition is excluded, even this marginal difference fades away: Relatively few students who complete community college humanities courses in communication, history, and theater go on to complete bachelor's degrees in these fields (2%, less than 1%, and 2%, respectively). Michigan community college students who do transfer and complete a bachelor's degree in the humanities accumulate an average of 20–35 excess credits.⁷ Black and Hispanic bachelor's degree completers in the humanities take longer on average to complete their degrees and are also more likely to graduate with excess credits.

Strengthening MiHumanities was intended to address these challenges. This two-year project began in 2020 with the goal of strengthening transfer pathways in four humanities majors: communication, English, history, and theater. These disciplines were chosen because they have relatively strong enrollments and are diverse in terms of course content (for example, theater is a performance discipline, and communication includes a number of applied courses). Two of these disciplines had previously engaged in statewide transfer efforts. English faculty had convened previously to create a transfer pathway but were unsuccessful in doing so. Communication faculty had developed a statewide agreement for three transferable courses, which faculty were interested in expanding and strengthening.

A Note on English Composition I and II

English Composition I and II are common general education course requirements at community colleges in Michigan and across the U.S. Although they cover material within the field of English, a humanities discipline, these courses are likely to focus on the mechanics of writing and therefore may not expose students to themes in the humanities in the same way that other writing or literature courses do. Accordingly, including composition courses in our humanities analysis may overstate the extent to which community college students take courses in the humanities. Yet we include composition courses in our analysis (unless otherwise stated) in part because of the challenges and opportunities it presents for strengthening and improving pathways to transfer both within English and in other fields of study.

About 60% of students in community colleges in Michigan complete a composition course. The course's near ubiquity, its typical home in the English department, and its focus on communication suggest that composition has the potential to engender student interest in further humanities study. Our inclusion of composition in this analysis provides context for that potential. At the same time, faculty reports suggest the need for stronger transfer alignment for both English Composition I and II. Our analysis confirms this, as 15% of community college transfers who take English Composition I at a four-year institution have already taken and passed the equivalent course at a community college. This circumstance was a significant focus of the English two- and four-year faculty who participated in the Strengthening MiHumanities project. To capture these nuances, we sometimes report on English coursetaking both including and excluding composition.

Excess Credits Among Michigan Transfer Students Who Complete Bachelor's Degrees in the Humanities



Note. Data are for 2009–2014 entry cohorts.

The Strengthening MiHumanities project was designed to build on previous statewide efforts to support the implementation of guided pathways and to build and strengthen transfer pathways. Michigan’s approach to these efforts emphasizes faculty engagement and voluntary agreements because the state does not have a centralized higher education system ([see box on page 7 on decentralized higher education](#)). To begin the project, the MCCA convened a steering committee of three members representing each of the state’s higher education sectors: community colleges, public universities, and independent colleges and universities. During the project period, the MCCA hosted a series of webinars on the next frontier of guided pathways work in Michigan as well as a series of Pedagogy for Peers virtual workshops that took place throughout the 2021-22 academic year, which focused on a range of topics, including transfer alignment, inclusive instruction, strengthening course outcomes, and using data. The Pedagogy for Peers workshop series also included an intensive six-week seminar on course redesign hosted by Achieving the Dream.⁸ Typically, these webinars and virtual workshops included whole-group presentations as well as discipline dialogues in which faculty gathered in facilitated breakout discussions with colleagues teaching in the same field.

The final product of the Strengthening MiHumanities project is a set of discipline roadmaps. For each of the four disciplines, the MCCA created a document (MCCA, n.d.) that outlines issues identified during the faculty dialogues, focal lower division courses that can form the foundation of the pathway, and recommendations for institutions to streamline the pathway from the associate to the bachelor’s degree level as well as to embed humanities instruction within multiple pathways.

Decentralized Higher Education in Michigan

There is significant variation in community college governance structures across states in the U.S. (Association of Community College Trustees, n.d.). Some states govern their community colleges through statewide higher education boards, whose domains include both community and public four-year colleges, while others rely on local governing boards. The roles and responsibilities of local or state higher education governing boards vary but generally encompass tuition-setting, hiring of executive positions, policy development and implementation, and monitoring and accountability efforts.

States with statewide higher education boards or other centralized coordination entities, particularly those that govern both two- and four-year institutions, can use policy and other incentives and directives to improve course transferability and create pathways to transfer in particular fields of study. In decentralized states, these efforts are more likely to begin with interested faculty and administrators, and there may be barriers to scaling up efforts to include all institutions or all fields of study.

Michigan is one of only four states without centralized governing or coordinating boards for its community and technical colleges. Instead, it relies on locally elected governing boards for each of its community colleges. The MCCA is a voluntary association of Michigan's community colleges. In the absence of a centralized state governance system for community colleges, the MCCA works with partner community colleges to develop and implement policies and activities, such as the Strengthening MiHumanities project, as well as to publicly advocate for legislation and reform efforts that can improve student access and outcomes at Michigan community colleges.

Because of the voluntary and therefore bottom-up nature of participation, Michigan's efforts to improve transferability have been largely faculty driven, and faculty tend to be responsive to authentic classroom-level problems of practice. In the Strengthening MiHumanities project, faculty provided input on the project's areas of focus and generated the institutional recommendations for improving pathways in the four disciplines.

Community colleges serve a diverse and talented pool of students. Nationally, community colleges enroll ...

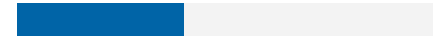
9.6 million

undergraduate students (2019–20 academic year)



accounting for **4 in 10** undergraduate students^b

40% of Black students



50% of Hispanic students



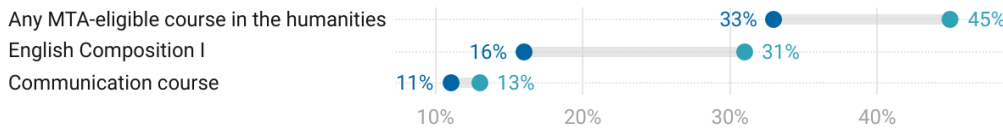
53% of Native American students^c



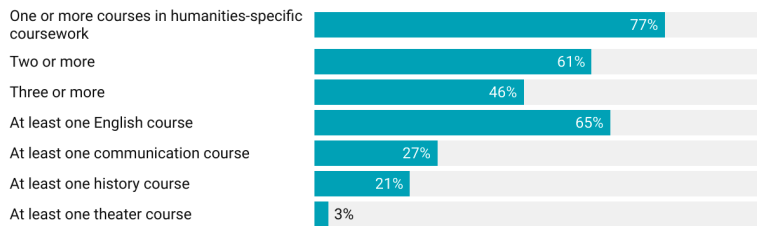
400k associate of arts degrees in general studies/liberal arts were awarded by community colleges (2015)

<10% were awarded in communication, English, history, or theater/visual arts^d

A greater share of Michigan community college students completed MTA-eligible courses in the humanities within their first year of enrollment in 2016 than in 2009.



Among the 2016 entering cohort, many students took at least one humanities course before transferring.



Michigan community college students are increasingly taking humanities courses.

In Michigan, many bachelor's degree completers in humanities and other fields have taken coursework at a community college.^e

81% of bachelor's degree completers who first enrolled at any MI college took a course at a MI community college (2009–2014)

75% of Black completers



86% of Hispanic completers



took a community college course

85% of bachelor's degree completers in humanities took a humanities course at a community college (2009–2014)

79% of Black completers in humanities



87% of Hispanic completers in humanities



took a humanities course at a community college

75% of bachelor's degree completers in humanities took two or more humanities courses at a community college (2009–2014)

66% of Black completers in humanities



78% of Hispanic completers in humanities



took two or more community college humanities courses

^aUnless otherwise noted, information in this table is based on analysis of Michigan administrative data that includes student demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, SES), course enrollment and outcomes, colleges attended, and degrees awarded from academic years 2009-10 through 2019-20 for all students who enrolled as a first-time-in-college student in a Michigan community college during these years.

^bJenkins & Fink (2020).

^cAmerican Association of Community Colleges (2022).

^dAuthors' calculations using IPEDS awards data for two-year colleges in 2015. All humanities degrees include degrees awarded under CIP 24, whereas only 30,000 associate degrees were awarded in communication, English, history, and theater/visual arts.

^eWe derive these statistics by cross-referencing our administrative data from Michigan, which includes enrollment, coursetaking, and degrees awarded for any student who ever enrolled in a Michigan community college, with IPEDS awards data for public and private four-year colleges in Michigan.

^fCCRC (2021a).

THE CHALLENGE ^a

Measures on Michigan Transfer in the Humanities

Too few community college students transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, and Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are disproportionately affected. Nationally^f ...

In Michigan ...

43% of community college students transferred (2013 entering cohort)



31% of community college students ever transfer to a four-year college

14% earn a bachelor's degree

2x White and higher income students are twice as likely to transfer as Black and Hispanic students

15% completed a bachelor's degree in six years (2013 entering cohort)

Fewer than 2% (2,961) of community college students in the 2009–2014 entry cohorts in Michigan transferred and completed a bachelor's degree in humanities in six years.

2,961
completers

1,273 in communication
418 in English
195 in history
817 in theater/visual arts

In the same cohorts, Black and Hispanic students comprised ...

23% of community college enrollment

22% of transfer students

11% of all bachelor's degree completers

12% of bachelor's degree completers in humanities

Few Michigan community college students earn bachelor's degrees in the humanities.

Even among Michigan transfer students who do complete a bachelor's degree, few do so in the humanities.

5%

of students who earned an associate degree and transferred completed a bachelor's degree in the humanities (business and health are the most popular fields, accounting for more than 40% of bachelor's degree completions among associate of arts degree earners). (2009–2014 entry cohorts)

Among the 2009–2014 entering cohorts, who went on to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree in humanities?

2.7% of students who took one or more humanities courses at the community college

3.1% of students who took two or more humanities courses at the community college

3.6% of students who took three or more humanities courses at the community college

Transfer and bachelor's degree completion rates in the humanities are only slightly higher among Michigan students who took related coursework at the community college.

Michigan community college students who complete bachelor's degrees accumulate upwards of 30 excess credits.

Humanities graduates on average earn slightly fewer excess credits than non-humanities graduates, but the number is still high. Black and Hispanic students graduate with slightly more excess credits on average than White students.

- Transfer students in the 2009–2014 entry cohorts who completed a bachelor's degree in the humanities on average earned **150 credits**, compared to an average of **157 credits** among non-humanities completers.
- **Black and Hispanic** humanities bachelor's degree completers earned **153 and 154 credits**, respectively.
- The mean and median number of credits earned by bachelor's degree completers who transferred **declined by about 12 credits** from 2009 to 2014 entry cohorts.

Promising Approaches to Building Coherent Pathways and Promoting the Humanities

In this section, we describe examples of efforts in Michigan from recent years to create more coherent and effective pathways to transfer in the humanities and to engage in onboarding practices that help students explore and connect to a humanities field or program early in their college career.

Pre-majors

In concert with building and clarifying cross-institutional pathways, community colleges are also establishing more coherent programs of study within their institutions. In Michigan, it is not uncommon for these discipline-specific program pathways to be called pre-majors or concentrations within an associate of arts or general transfer degree. Stakeholders reported the advantages of accompanying these clear program pathways with a specialized advising approach, wherein advisors work within a group of related programs (called a meta-major) so they can build expertise on specific program requirements, transfer requirements, and career opportunities.

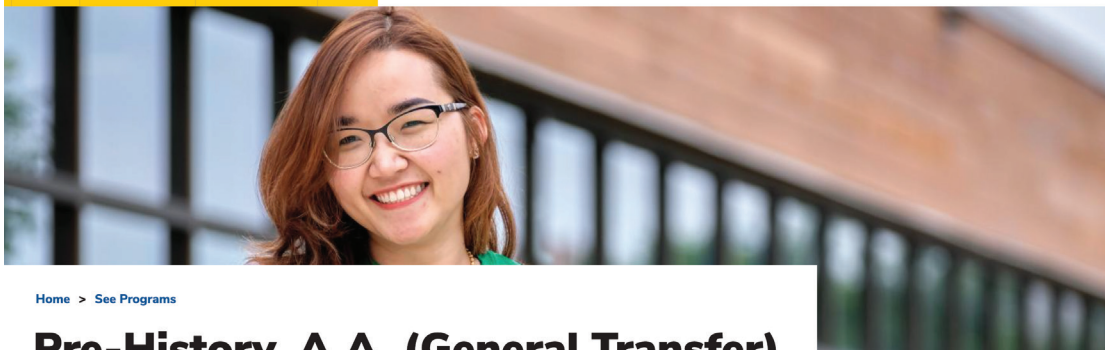
Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) offers an example of a diverse collection of pre-majors in the humanities and liberal arts that are clearly communicated to students on the college website. GRCC's programs, which number over 100, are organized into 12 academic pathways. Within these pathways, the college has organized programs for transfer-intending students as pre-majors. GRCC offers pre-majors in history, communication studies, English literature, writing, philosophy, and French, among others in the liberal arts and other fields.

Students in humanities pre-majors earn a general transfer associate degree, but their coursetaking is focused on a particular area of interest. On GRCC's website, the page for each academic pathway includes a written introduction and an embedded video (see, e.g., GRCC, n.d.-b) that explains how pathways are structured and function generally, as well as the opportunities within the specific pathway (GRCC, n.d.-a). When students click on a pre-major, the webpage begins with a list of possible careers related to that discipline and a list of skills students can gain from studying the discipline. See the next page for an example from the Pre-History, A.A. webpage (GRCC, n.d.-c).

Underneath the introduction, there is a list of program courses and requirements that details not only the MTA general education requirements but also the program's core courses and elective courses. The webpage also provides a suggested roadmap for the order in which students should take courses. Embedded links allow students to "See courses for this program in the catalog" and "See jobs and salaries related to this program."

The pre-major program structure and the accompanying information on the college website help students see the ways a humanities program at the community college can fit into the larger picture of transferring to a four-year institution and continuing onto various career paths.

In concert with building and clarifying cross-institutional pathways, Michigan community colleges are also establishing more coherent programs of study within their institutions.


[Home](#) > [See Programs](#)

Pre-History, A.A. (General Transfer)

Gain a better understanding of the complex cultures, historical systems and events that have driven the past, produced the present, and will guide our future.

Graduates with a bachelor's degree in History can enter a wide variety of fields, in roles such as:

- Analyst or researcher.
- Historian or archivist.
- Campaign worker, consultant or lobbyist.
- Legal assistant or congressional aide.
- Foreign service officer.
- Foundation staffer.
- Information specialist or intelligence agent.
- Journalist.
- Personnel manager.
- Teacher or educator.
- Advertiser or broadcaster.
- Communicator or editor.
- Advocate.
- Business person.

Your Pre-History, A.A. (General Transfer) Degree will allow you to transfer as a junior to the four-year college or university of your choice to complete your bachelor's degree.

In the History pre-major at GRCC you will examine human connections across time and place. You will learn about past human experiences and their influence upon our present lives, including:

- Social life.
- Economics.
- Gender.
- Culture.
- Philosophy.
- Conflict.
- Politics.

Students of history study individuals, communities and nations from every perspective, analyzing evidence in order to better understand the cause and significance of moments in history. In this way, history helps us understand complex modern problems.

Throughout your courses you will develop critical skills to enhance your marketability and success in any professional career. Those skills include:

- Research and analysis.
- Creative methods for recognizing patterns in information.
- Techniques for effective and persuasive writing.

Transfer agreements

Between 2017 and 2019, community colleges, public universities, and private colleges and universities in Michigan collaborated to create multi-institutional articulation agreements called MiTransfer Pathways in 10 popular majors (Michigan Transfer Network, n.d.-b). In a MiTransfer Pathway, students complete a core of general education courses defined in the Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA) and an additional set of foundational courses in the major, along with any remaining requirements and electives needed to complete an associate degree to guarantee transfer with junior standing in the major at a participating bachelor's degree-granting institution. Currently, all of the state's 28 community colleges and 15 public universities, as well as 12 independent colleges and universities, participate in one or more of the pathways. Two of these pathways are in humanities fields: art and communication. The communication pathway includes three courses that will be accepted as equivalent at receiving institutions, and the art pathway includes five courses. These transfer pathways have the advantage of providing transfer-intending students with clarity on a set of courses to take that will meet bachelor's degree requirements at a wide range of institutions across the state.

In our fieldwork for this project, we identified ways that institutional partners maintained more robust bilateral agreements that built upon the statewide pathways. One example is a 3+1 program at Washtenaw Community College (WCC) and Eastern Michigan University (EMU) that leads to a bachelor's degree in communication. Students enrolled in this program at WCC complete the MTA requirements (30 credits of general education) plus a set of defined communication courses and electives of up to 60 credits that will transfer to EMU. When they arrive at EMU, they take the remaining 30 credits to complete the major and earn their degree. Faculty and advisors at WCC reported that they regularly promote this program to students as an efficient and cost-effective option for students. As one faculty member explained, "I talk about [the program] in my classes, and I often have students raise their hand and say, 'Yeah, that's what I'm planning to do.' And then I turn it over to them and have them talk about it."

Career exploration

Alongside efforts to create more coherent humanities pathways, we found examples of promising efforts to help students explore humanities career possibilities. For example, Lake Michigan College's (LMC) campus houses the Mendel Center for Arts and Technology, which is the largest performing arts facility and conference event center in southwest Michigan. The Mendel Center was once a for-profit auxiliary of the college designed to earn revenue for the college from productions and events that took place there, and it has been a popular venue for musical and theatrical performers on tour. However, in 2022, LMC began the process of merging the Mendel Center with its academic Visual and Performing Arts Department in response to an increase in the number of students participating in theater courses and productions, an increase in the number of public productions put on by LMC faculty and students, and the introduction of community education programs in the arts. An administrator described the goal of the merger in this way: "The education of our students is going

to come first, serving the community through the arts is second, and making money off of it comes last.”

By merging the Mendel Center with the Visual and Performing Arts Department, LMC will be able to offer students enrolled in performing arts courses or programs opportunities to take part in productions alongside professionals in the industry who make use of the center. Working alongside professionals can inspire students to pursue the performing arts by helping them envision and get excited about relevant career opportunities. In the words of one administrator, “Even if they’re not going to go into the arts, it helps them to get motivated about school, it helps them to understand better how they work as a human being, [and] it helps them to work better with other people.”

Another example is the Center for Experiential Learning at Schoolcraft College, which is the product of a grant partnership between Schoolcraft and the University of Michigan aimed at strengthening transfer pathways. The center brings some of Schoolcraft’s most robust and popular co-academic programs under one organizational roof to allow for more streamlined and intentionally developed recruitment and outreach efforts. These programs include honors scholars, service learning, internship opportunities, and field experience opportunities, which play a critical role in exposing students to career opportunities in their field and helping students feel motivated and excited about their program of study. Examples of humanities co-academic experiences include serving as a writer or editor of Schoolcraft’s literary magazine *The MacGuffin* and participating in the STEAMzSchoolcraft Conference, where undergraduates practice presenting their research. Many of these opportunities are embedded within—instead of alongside—the curriculum in part because faculty know where to access resources for this level of curricular support. As described by one administrator, the center addresses a problem that is not uncommon in community colleges:

These [opportunities] exist, but they’re fractals. This fractal over here is just doing amazing pieces. And maybe somebody over here in this online group or this off-campus center is doing something, but we don’t always know about it, or it’s not synchronized in such a way that it will become larger than the sum of its parts.

The idea behind the Center for Experiential Learning is to make enriching co-curricular experiences accessible to community college students to (1) better prepare them as competitive applicants for transfer to four-year institutions and (2) help them explore career possibilities in their discipline. As one administrator said:

Community college students . . . often just don’t get the same kind of co-academic experience [as four-year college students]; they don’t have the same kind of access to that. When a Schoolcraft student who has done something at Schoolcraft just beyond a transcript—a good student who’s serious and has ambition to transfer somewhere—has an experience doing service learning, gets an opportunity to go out into the community and do this thing with a teacher—that is very confidence stoking. So hopefully, students who have those kinds of co-academic experiences will feel more comfortable pursuing those really high-impact opportunities at the university and feel like they belong more.

In addition to these examples, which largely take place outside of class, some faculty members shared ways that they embed career-connected content and assignments in their courses to pique student interest in humanities and liberal arts as fields for further study. At WCC, faculty formed the Liberal Arts Innovation Group to raise awareness about the value of liberal arts among both staff and students and to showcase the utility of a liberal arts education in the workplace. One resource they shared within their group is resume-worthy assignments, which engage students in hands-on and project-based learning experiences. In one example, students enrolled in a communication course worked with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to create a media library. In addition, the Liberal Arts Innovation Group sponsors an annual panel discussion and networking event that features professional writers and others in writing-intensive careers.

Tackling Barriers to Strengthen Pathways in the Humanities

Creating coherent program pathways in the humanities that lead to transfer with junior standing in a major and designing inspiring early onboarding experiences that warm students up to college and their fields of interest will require time and resources. In our interviews with faculty and administrators at two- and four-year colleges in Michigan, the barriers and challenges to this work were made clear. At the same time, the Strengthening MiHumanities project offered insights into how these challenges can be overcome.

Clarifying the value of the humanities

When asked about efforts to strengthen humanities education at their institutions, stakeholders across sectors frequently pointed to the ways that their programs and areas of study were misunderstood or undervalued by individuals, the institution, and society. Stakeholders reported that a prevailing bias against humanities resulted in a range of interrelated consequences, including shrinking course and program enrollments and institutional underinvestment in programs and departments. Interviewees gave examples of new buildings and other infrastructure upgrades that mostly benefit STEM and occupational programs and the wide range of federal, state, and private funding that is reserved for increasing student access to and success in science- and technology-related fields. Beyond these large-scale matters, stakeholders observed that students were implicitly or explicitly dissuaded from pursuing humanities degrees in a number of ways. One faculty member reported:

We actually hear some sad things from those students when they tell us what they heard from our formal advising, because a lot of those conversations seem to try and steer students away from history. Our advisors understand teaching, but they don't understand other things like public history or how you can use a history degree for really anything else.

Some students affirmed that they felt pressure from people in their lives to pursue other fields of study:

Stakeholders reported that a prevailing bias against humanities resulted in a range of interrelated consequences, including shrinking course and program enrollments and institutional underinvestment in programs and departments.

My parents are both in the healthcare field, and they were like, “Well, you really need to make sure that you can get a job with whatever you’re majoring in.” That’s why I started to cycle through different majors because I started to realize that I might not actually be able to get a very good job with a creative writing degree.

In the face of these conditions, faculty and administrators reported increased motivation to promote the humanities and their relevance to students through education and outreach to advisors and colleagues in other areas of the institution. As will be noted below, more resources were needed to support this work.

Faculty who participated in the Strengthening MiHumanities workshops and meetings expressed a commitment to broadening access to humanities education, particularly for students beginning their postsecondary education in community colleges. It was common for participants to frame their interest in the project in these terms:

I don’t want to go back to a time where only the most wealthy, privileged people in this country have the ability to study the humanities or history. But that’s where we’re heading right now if we don’t improve things.

Because Strengthening MiHumanities convened faculty and administrators from across institutions and sectors, some participants viewed it as an opportunity to share strategies to improve the marketing and onboarding of students into humanities programs and to raise a unified voice about the value of humanities education.

Improving alignment across institutions and sectors

A second challenge that Strengthening MiHumanities was explicitly intended to help address was institutional misalignment in course numbering, content, and learning objectives. Differences across institutions mean that courses might not be accepted for credit in the major. For example, if a course at a community college with a 200-level prefix is labeled with a 300-level prefix at a university, the student may be asked to retake it. Faculty also provided examples of specific disciplinary differences in course emphasis, philosophy, or content that are associated with transfer challenges:

There’s old-school training that’s philosophy based, and not all MFA acting programs do that. So then if you are a faculty member that came from one of those programs, you’re infusing those values into your acting class. If a community college faculty member is not teaching from that perspective, then you’re going to say that the acting class they are teaching is not an equivalent course.

By bringing together faculty from two- and four-year institutions in discipline-based conversations, the Strengthening MiHumanities project was intended to elicit some of these challenges and identify opportunities for greater coherence. One meeting focused on crafting learning objectives to move the focus in evaluating transferability away from course titles and descriptions (which may accentuate minor differences) and toward the skills and knowledge students gain in the course. The opportunity for statewide coordination was seen as particularly valuable in these conversations

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because community colleges find themselves trying to meet the needs of multiple transfer partners:

What University of Michigan–Dearborn may want is likely to be different than what Eastern Michigan University wants, maybe different than what Wayne State University wants. So then we have to try and build a course that hits the highlight areas that each of the partners wants while still maintaining its own internal integrity.

Michigan has invested in statewide initiatives to address these challenges with transferability and course alignment across institutions. The FY 2018 Michigan state budget included an appropriation to relaunch the Michigan Transfer Network (MTN), including the development of a portal to assist with building multi-institutional associate-to-bachelor's degree transfer pathways. MCCA staff shared MTN resources with faculty participating in Strengthening MiHumanities meetings. One of these resources is a database that allows users (including students) to run reports that show which courses from sending institutions will be accepted by receiving institutions as an equivalent course or for general transfer credit. Users can create matrices of equivalent courses across multiple institutions. To identify opportunities to improve alignment and transferability, the MTN also hosts a document repository that allows users from any institution in Michigan to upload master syllabi and compare course objectives, assignments, and learning outcomes. This provides faculty and others centralized access to information about equivalent or potentially equivalent courses across the state. As part of the discipline discussions during the Strengthening MiHumanities convenings, faculty identified focal courses for a transfer pathway in their field; these courses and other recommendations for streamlining the pathway are included in the MiHumanities discipline roadmaps.

To successfully address issues of misalignment and strengthen transfer pathways, both two- and four-year partners must be engaged. Some interviewees perceived that four-year stakeholders may be less invested in building these relationships and pathways, in part to preserve enrollments in their own lower division courses. Many stakeholders pointed to a trend toward declining postsecondary enrollments as a factor that could either motivate or demotivate four-year participation in strengthening transfer pathways. One four-year administrator expressed a desire for their four-year colleagues to adopt a more cooperative disposition:

You can be the dragon and hoard your treasure as it slowly diminishes, or you can try and build some bridges and expand your territory and grow. We could all grow instead of all shrinking as we hide inside our little medieval walls.

As four-year institutions face enrollment declines, a strong pipeline from a community college partner could increase the number of students enrolling in upper division courses and successfully completing the bachelor's degree in a humanities major. Interviewees also identified how increased coordination across institutions could reduce redundancies and respond to evolving labor market needs in ways that could result in stronger enrollments. One faculty member offered a concrete example in the field of communication:

To successfully address issues of misalignment and strengthen transfer pathways, both two- and four-year partners must be engaged.

Do you need 15 journalism programs in a state when that job market is decreasing so rapidly? Maybe regionalize it somehow, and then certain schools can work on other things.

As noted above in the infographic on page 8, the majority of bachelor's degree earners take courses in community colleges. One goal of the Strengthening MiHumanities meetings was to raise awareness of the important contributions that community colleges are already making to the success of students who go on to earn degrees at four-year institutions and thereby clarify the benefits of improving transfer pathways for four-year institutions. To create the MiHumanities discipline roadmaps, faculty reviewed data provided by CCRC about the number of students who transfer, the bachelor's degrees earned by transferring students, and common courses taken at two- and four-year institutions in each of the four disciplines.

Building infrastructure for coordination

Finally, stakeholders noted that improving pathway alignment across institutions and sectors requires time and administrative coordination. This work was challenging for two-year faculty to initiate on their own, particularly since most individuals we interviewed reported few relationships with faculty in their discipline at other institutions in other sectors. Several faculty members reported encountering challenges in previous efforts to improve the transferability of the courses at partner institutions:

[A colleague] developed a course last fall, and one of the things she really paid attention to was transferability—she wanted it to transfer to [the university]. And she asked, “Who should I talk to about transferring?” and got three different answers.

It's all about personal relationships, and then you have to bring the data [on the number of students transferring to the receiving institution]. But you have to figure out where to get the data and what data to get. And you have to have personal relationships where the four-year faculty respect the two-year faculty.

In humanities disciplines like theater, history, languages, religion, and philosophy, the departments at community colleges are quite small, sometimes with only one full-time faculty member or only part-time faculty members teaching in that field. This means that there are limited human resources for coordinating across institutions and for developing the types of engaging onboarding experiences described earlier. In an environment of scarce resources and decreasing enrollment, one faculty member described a chicken-and-egg scenario at their institution, where several departments have no full-time faculty members:

When you have a full-time faculty member running a department, then you have a more engaged person who's a champion for that area. You assume that you have higher retention among students; maybe they're running a student club or they're just really involved. And then the question gets asked, “How can we improve enrollment?” And I say, “We improve enrollment by having a full-time faculty member.” And

they say, “We can’t get a full-time faculty member until we have better enrollment.” That’s the chicken-and-egg thing I’m talking about.

The structure and resources provided by the Strengthening MiHumanities project have helped mitigate some of these challenges. By providing a venue for faculty to meet virtually, the project brokered new faculty relationships across institutions and sectors. MCCA staff provided administrative and logistical support by facilitating meetings and keeping records, and CCRC provided discipline-specific data on coursetaking and transfer patterns. Looking to the future, state agencies have the potential to play this role as conveners and facilitators of conversations across sectors. Disciplinary societies and other intermediaries may also play this role, particularly in generating consensus about learning outcomes for lower division courses in a major.

Conclusion

The typical program structure in community colleges—in which most transfer-intending students enroll in a general studies or liberal arts program—does not provide a coherent pathway to transfer in the humanities. Instead, students encounter a patchwork of courses, colleges struggle to identify which students are interested in majoring in the humanities, and students who persist to transfer encounter an inefficient system in which they must retake courses at their receiving institution. Clearly defined pathways that lead to junior standing in a major can invite students to consider study in the humanities. Colleges can complement these pathways with resources to warm students up to study in the humanities, including program-specific advising and in-class and out-of-class applied learning and career exploration experiences. The Strengthening MiHumanities project in Michigan convened faculty and administrators from two- and four-year institutions to identify opportunities to strengthen transfer pathways in the humanities. Drawing on lessons learned in the Strengthening MiHumanities project, we offer the following recommendations for states and intermediaries, including disciplinary societies, and for institutions.

Clearly defined pathways that lead to junior standing in a major can invite students to consider study in the humanities.

Recommendations for states and intermediaries

1. Create opportunities for faculty from two- and four-year institutions to convene in like-discipline groups. Provide facilitation support to help faculty identify:
 - Learning outcomes for the first two years to prepare students for transfer in the major.
 - Opportunities to develop regional partnerships and new programs to reduce redundancies and respond to student interests and labor market needs.
 - Strategies to collectively raise awareness of the benefits of taking courses and/or pursuing degrees in the humanities.
2. Compile information on the relationship between humanities programs and the labor market with a focus on local career opportunities and the earnings of humanities graduates in a range of fields and showcase how colleges are using this information to support students’ program exploration and pathway planning.

3. Provide incentives and support for faculty participation in these activities, keeping in mind that small colleges and small departments likely have few full-time faculty.
4. Analyze data on transfer patterns to guide efforts and to make the case to four-year institutions about the value of stronger pathways. Key metrics to investigate include:
 - Top sending/receiving institutions.
 - Bachelor's degree majors that transfer students enroll in and complete post-transfer.
 - The extent to which community college students repeat equivalent courses post-transfer.

Recommendations for institutions

1. Create coherence for students within the general studies/liberal arts degree program through pre-majors, concentrations, or other structures that create smaller and more specific academic communities.
2. Ask every student about their interests, strengths, and aspirations and connect students interested in the humanities with major-specific mentoring, program-specific advising, and opportunities for career exploration.
3. Create applied learning opportunities inside and outside of class so that students see relevant and real-world benefits of studying the humanities.
4. Invest in humanities departments through faculty hiring and other supports such that faculty have the necessary resources to carry out these recommendations.

Addressing the challenges our nation and world are facing will require dedicated people with a set of dispositions and knowledge fostered through the study of humanities—creativity, civic engagement, empathy, ethics, and an understanding of the role that culture and context play in shaping our environment. Employers are seeking skills that humanities coursework develops, namely, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills. Community colleges have the potential to help a large and diverse population of students join a path to further study in the humanities. Broadening access to the study of humanities by smoothing pathways from community colleges through transfer has the potential to benefit individual students as well as society.

Broadening access to the study of humanities by smoothing pathways from community colleges through transfer has the potential to benefit individual students as well as society.

Endnotes

1. Data include student demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, SES), course enrollments and outcomes, colleges attended, and degrees awarded from academic years 2009-10 through 2019-20 for all students who enrolled as a first-time-in-college student in a Michigan community college during these years.
2. We conducted interviews/focus groups with 53 faculty, deans, advisors, college administrators, and staff across the state of Michigan to learn more about transfer pathways in the humanities as well as opportunities for and challenges to strengthening these pathways. We also conducted focus groups with 15 students to learn about their experiences with the humanities. Interviewees represented a wide range of fields of study, including communication, English, history, theater, anthropology, philosophy, world languages, and visual and performing arts.
3. Among entering 2016 community college students who transferred within three years, 77% took one or more humanities courses prior to transfer, 61% took two or more, and 46% took three or more. Much of this was in English composition, but 27% took at least one communication course and 21% took at least one history course prior to transfer (3% took at least one theater course).
4. Reported percentages for the Michigan data are for 2009–2014 entry cohorts.
5. Among first-time-in-college Michigan community college fall 2009–2014 entrants, 2% transferred and completed a bachelor’s degree in communication, English, history, or theater/visual arts.
6. For more information on the MTA, see Michigan Transfer Network (n.d.-a).
7. Michigan community college transfer students in the 2009–2014 entry cohorts who completed a bachelor’s in communication, English, history, and theater earned 143, 152, 157, and 147 college-level credits, respectively, upon graduation with a bachelor’s degree, which typically requires 120–126 credits.
8. Achieving the Dream (<https://achievingthedream.org/>) is a national nonprofit community college reform organization with a network of more than 300 colleges.

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