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Exploring the State of the Humanities in Community Colleges

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Abstract

Drawing on research literature and a set of informal interviews with humanities faculty and leaders of relevant initiatives, this paper first discusses what is known about humanities coursework in community colleges. It then outlines three key challenges facing humanities education in this higher education sector: (1) an oversimplified identification of community colleges as providers primarily of vocational education, (2) limited professional supports for community college humanities faculty, and (3) weak humanities transfer pathways between community colleges and destination four-year colleges. The paper goes on to describe current efforts that attempt to address these challenges and concludes with a call for future research intended to enhance our understanding of the humanities in community colleges and the ways humanities education in community colleges might be strengthened and improved.

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1. Introduction

The study of the humanities has long been understood as important in developing students' capacity to be creative and adaptable thinkers and engaged and thoughtful citizens. As our workforce needs and social and political contexts evolve, in part driven by advances in technology, skills and behaviors informed by humanities coursework are perhaps more critical than ever. Yet the study of humanities is often seen as the purview of four-year liberal arts colleges when in fact private four-year institutions confer only about a third of all bachelor's degrees in humanities fields (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-c). Humanities in community colleges receive very limited attention in the research literature and public discourse, compared with humanities at liberal arts colleges or four-year institutions generally, despite the fact that public two-year colleges enroll nearly 40% of all undergraduates (Ginder et al., 2018) and confer more degrees in humanities than any other sector of higher education¹ (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Many students who earn associate degrees in humanities from community colleges then transfer to four-year institutions for further education. And students who embark upon associate degrees in other fields at community colleges also complete humanities courses.

In this paper we discuss what is known about humanities coursework in community colleges, three key challenges facing humanities education in this sector, and current initiatives which attempt to address those challenges. We draw on the research literature and a set of informal phone interviews with humanities faculty in community colleges and leaders of initiatives designed to support humanities in community colleges (see Appendix) to inform our analysis. The individuals we interviewed shaped our understanding of the issues in the field and pointed us to research studies, resources, and examples discussed in this paper. The paper concludes with a call for future research intended to enhance our understandings of the challenges and strengths of the humanities in community colleges and the ways humanities education in community colleges might be improved.

¹ In 2015, 363,000 associate degrees and 213,000 bachelor's degrees were awarded in humanities fields (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

2. The Humanities

For the purpose of this paper, we use the term humanities to describe a set of fields that “have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods” (National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, 1965). These include the study of arts; American, cultural, ethnic, and gender studies; English language and literature and foreign languages; history; philosophy; religion; and interdisciplinary coursework in the humanities (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-e). Within this disciplinary diversity, fields in the humanities share a focus on the study of humans, the contexts and cultures in which we live, and how the human condition has been documented through art, language, and expression. Inherent in the study of the humanities is attention to the diversity of the human experience and the ways it has changed over time. The skills students develop in humanities coursework—written and oral communication, ethics, critical and analytic thinking, and collaboration—are widely understood to be valuable for a productive workforce and an engaged citizenry (Deming, 2015; Weise et al., 2018).

A report commissioned by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2013) describes the importance of the humanities:

As we strive to create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common. The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities— including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts—foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds. (p. 9)

This depiction suggests that the knowledge and skills derived from the study of humanities are the foundation for a healthy pluralistic society. Given the large proportion of college students enrolled in community colleges, an increased focus on ensuring

access to high-quality humanities courses could confer benefits not only to the students but also to our communities and nation.

3. Community Colleges

To understand the role and position of the humanities in community colleges, one must consider distinct features of these institutions, including their commitment to low-cost, open-access education and their multiple missions (Dougherty, 1994). Community colleges provide inexpensive career and technical education oriented toward particular regional labor markets; at the same time, through their transfer function, community colleges expand access to baccalaureate degrees. Indeed, four out of five students who enroll in community colleges indicate a desire to transfer to earn a four-year degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). Community colleges are well-positioned to respond to local economic needs and opportunities, build partnerships with business and industry, and contribute to the civic and public life of their communities (Brown, 2018).

Community colleges are also noteworthy in the diversity of students they enroll. When 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). In addition, over half of community college students are over the age of 22 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). The diversity of community college students provides opportunities for creating rich learning environments, and it positions community colleges as leaders in creating a more equitable and inclusive society (Edgecombe, 2019). At the same time, many students enrolled in community colleges have academic and non-academic needs which colleges strive, and sometimes struggle, to address. For example, many community college students are balancing college with the demands of work and caregiving responsibilities, and many students even experience housing and food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). In addition, large numbers of students entering community colleges have historically been referred to developmental (or remedial) coursework in reading, writing, and math, which, as

traditionally structured, creates barriers to student success (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016).

Given these and other challenges, including persistent underfunding in the sector (Kahlenberg, 2015), community colleges have success rates that, while improving, are still relatively low: About 40% of students who begin in community college earn a credential from a two- or four-year college within six years, as compared to about two thirds of students who begin in a four-year public institution (Shapiro et al., 2018). And only about a third of community college students transfer to a four-year institution within six years (Shapiro et al., 2017). Increased scrutiny of these outcomes has jumpstarted a range of reform in the sector. First, the field saw improvement efforts around particular college course offerings, such as developmental education, and services, like advising (e.g., Klempin et al., 2019; Rutschow et al., 2019). And more recently, the field has seen momentum build for comprehensive whole-college reform efforts, using frameworks like guided pathways or models like the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2017; Scrivener et al., 2015). More attention has also turned to the development of more effective transfer partnerships between two- and four-year colleges (e.g., Wyner et al., 2016).

Thus, the community college context is one of tremendous possibility; these institutions are a gateway to opportunity for students who may have few other postsecondary options. And they are sites of experimentation and innovation across both academic and student services functions. At the same time, as compared to institutions in other higher education sectors, community colleges have fewer resources available to serve students with greater needs (Kahlenberg, 2015; Century Foundation, 2019).

4. Humanities in Community Colleges

Within this open-access, locally responsive postsecondary education context, humanities coursework and programming may confer a vital set of benefits. First, across all higher education sectors, humanities coursework confers a set of skills focused on collaboration, ethical judgment, oral and written communication, and critical thinking that are essential to an advanced workforce and that employers themselves prioritize

(Hart Research Associates, 2018; Rios et al., 2020). Second, Kim (2019a) argues that community colleges have the potential to be engines of social change, in addition to their capacity as engines of economic opportunity. The study of humanities provides a pathway for developing one’s views as a citizen in one’s local community as well as in the broader world. Humanities education may inspire students to become engaged in public life, including local civic, artistic, and community-oriented initiatives. Third, for the many community college students who are the first in their family to enroll in college, who come from minoritized racial/ethnic groups, or who have had negative experiences in K-12 education, humanities coursework may allow for a fuller exploration and expression of identity and more meaningful connection to content—and by extension connection to college—than study in other fields (e.g., Imad, 2019). Finally, 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 (Westermann, 2018).

While there is limited information on humanities in community colleges, research indicates that about one fifth of community college course offerings are in humanities and social science fields (Pippins et al., 2019). A diversity of fields is reflected in these courses. Pippins and colleagues found that almost half of humanities and social science credits earned in community colleges are in the field of English. And developmental English accounts for a large proportion of these enrollments: nearly 30% of community college students enroll in developmental English (Chen & Simone, 2016). Visual and performing arts coursework is another significant category, representing 17% of humanities and social science course enrollments.² Coursework classified under “general studies” and “areas studies” represent 16% and 13% of humanities and social science community college course enrollments. Interdisciplinary courses offered at some colleges are classified with a humanities (or HUM) course prefix. HUM 16 at De Anza College (CA), for example, is entitled “Arts, Ideas and Values.” HUM 275 at Hawai’i Community College is “Psychology & Expressive Arts” while HUM 205 at Glendale

² Visual and performing arts courses are excluded from some definitions of humanities because of their professional and technical focus (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-e).

Community College is “Introduction to Cinema.” Other fields with course enrollments in community colleges include foreign languages, history, and philosophy and theology.

By several measures, humanities course offerings in community colleges are robust and critical to student success. Students who begin in community colleges and go on to transfer take somewhat more of their humanities and liberal arts coursework at the community college (Pippins et al., 2019). And trends in associate degree completions bode well for increased humanities course enrollment in community colleges. Specifically, the proportion of associate degrees that were in humanities fields increased from 35% to 42% between 2000 and 2015; this is in comparison to vocational/professional fields, which have fallen as a proportion of associate degrees from 45% to 33% in the same period (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-a). What is more, associate degree completers in all fields outside of humanities and liberal arts—including STEM, health, and information technology—complete between 20% and 35% of their credits in humanities and social science fields (Pippins et al., 2019). This indicates that humanities coursework is not only important in preparing students for transfer, but also in supporting the education of students in science, technology, and career-technical terminal degree fields.

5. Challenges Facing Humanities in Community Colleges

In universities and liberal arts colleges, the challenges facing the humanities have been well documented, including concerns about decreasing humanities enrollment, the consolidation and elimination of programs, and the loss of full-time faculty (Brookins, 2018; Hillis Miller, 2014; Lusin, 2019; Schmidt, 2018). Our interviews and review of the literature uncovered a range of challenges facing the humanities in community colleges, which are in some cases reflective of broader issues facing the humanities in higher education but in other cases wholly unique to the two-year sector. To follow, we discuss three of these challenges and how they undermine stronger humanities programming in community colleges.

1. Community colleges are associated with vocational education

Despite the fact that the majority of their students are transfer-intending, community colleges are closely associated with workforce training. This is evident in the public discourse around the colleges, which often focuses more on their contributions to regional and national economic development and less on their contributions to promoting access to four-year colleges and universities and to civic life more generally, including the benefits to society of a more educated and engaged citizenry (Kim, 2019b). The emphasis on vocational education is evident in national legislation and initiatives, including the 2009 Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Program, which provided federal financial support to community colleges for increased workforce training, and the 2018 Pledge to America's Workers, in which companies committed to increase employment and job training opportunities. Indeed, Bailey and Belfield (2019) point out that there is longstanding bipartisan consensus on the desirability of career and technical education. The apparent de-emphasis of community college humanities education in the public imagination is reminiscent of the concern that humanities coursework is undervalued relative to professional training across higher education sectors (e.g., Nussbaum, 2010). The lack of visibility of humanities education in community colleges is undoubtedly related to the limited investment in humanities education in community colleges and the limited research on the benefits of humanities coursework and strategies for improving humanities programming for community college students.

2. Community college humanities faculty have limited professional supports

Faculty in community colleges are commonly engaged in a demanding set of experiences relative to their peers at four-year institutions. In commuter institutions, faculty are perhaps the most critical stakeholder in supporting student success (Whitten et al., 2017). Research shows that curricula, instructional methods, and other faculty behaviors can influence student outcomes (MacArthur et al., 2015; Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019), particularly for students from traditionally marginalized groups (Bauer, 2014; Rendon, 1994). Yet, two thirds of community college faculty are part-time, contingent instructional staff (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016). The number of full-time instructors who teach humanities courses other than English is small at many community

colleges. Indeed, part-time faculty may teach most or all of the humanities courses at some institutions, and some institutions may have departments or divisions with only a single full-time faculty member, suggesting an experience of relative professional isolation.

Like their counterparts across the spectrum of higher education, community college faculty are likely to be experts in their disciplines with limited pre-service training in teaching. Yet community college faculty teach an increasingly diverse set of students who bring with them a set of experiences and strengths that may not be reflected in the traditional college curriculum. To support and retain community college students, faculty may need to adopt a set of instructional and relational practices that broadly fall under the term culturally responsive teaching (e.g., Pappamihel & Moreno, 2011). For faculty who do not share their students' backgrounds (more than two thirds of community college faculty are White, compared to about half of community college students) (Snyder et al., 2019), this may mean confronting implicit biases and adopting new ways of interacting with and supporting students (Booker, 2016; Guiffrida, 2005).

Unfortunately, community college faculty tend to have limited access to intensive or reflective professional development focused on improving student learning and success. Due to lack of time, opportunity, and financial support, many adjunct faculty members have few opportunities to engage in professional development of any kind (Eagan et al., 2015; Kezar, 2013; Kramer et al., 2014). But even full-time faculty, who have access to a broader range of resources, may still have unmet professional needs related to supporting student success. While community colleges offer on-campus professional development through centers for teaching and learning, new faculty orientation, and convocation, institutional investment in professional development in higher education is limited (Bass et al., 2019).

Community college faculty may engage with their disciplinary peers through scholarly associations in their disciplines like the Modern Language Association, the National Association of Ethnic Studies, or the American Academy of Religion. But community college faculty may find themselves on the margins of the academic communities intended to provide professional support. Annual meetings of disciplinary associations that serve faculty from across higher education sectors may have little focus

on the professional experiences of instructional faculty responsible for teaching the lower-division curriculum. This may be particularly true of associations that prioritize scholarship.

3. Humanities pathways between two- and four-year institutions are weak

Across all fields of study, the transfer mechanisms allowing community college students to apply credits to their bachelor's degree are complex, uneven, and inefficient (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Transfer students commonly accumulate excess credits and must retake courses as they move across institutions (Logue, 2017). This may be because the courses they take at community colleges do not apply for general education credits, or perhaps more commonly, because they do not count for credit within their intended major. In humanities and liberal arts fields, Pippins and Belfield (2019) find that degree programs in community colleges are not well-aligned with bachelor's degree programs in these fields. They describe humanities course requirements as a "patchwork" which allow students considerable flexibility. They argue that this patchwork results in a lack of clarity on "[what] coursework they should complete before they transfer and how that prior coursework relates to their subsequent pathway at a four-year college" (p. 2).

While this patchwork of humanities and liberal arts course requirements presents obstacles for degree completion for all transfer-intending students, it may present particular challenges for students intending to pursue study in the humanities in four-year colleges and beyond. Weak pathways to humanities degrees between two- and four-year institutions are common (e.g., Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2019). For example, almost all community college degrees in humanities fields are awarded in "general studies," "liberal arts," or "humanities" rather than in specific fields (e.g., history, English, or foreign languages). Guided pathways reforms, which hundreds of community colleges are undertaking to clarify students' program pathways in service of greater student success, have the potential to create more robust programs in humanities fields—for example, by designing an associate in arts degree program with an emphasis in history and guiding students with an interest in history to enroll in this program rather than in general studies. However, to support the success of transfer students, community colleges are ultimately reliant on the willingness of four-year institutions to engage in discussions of cross-institutional pathways and course equivalencies.

6. Supports for the Humanities in Community Colleges

In the face of the broader social and cultural emphasis and investment on STEM and vocational education, a number of notable initiatives support the humanities. Most prominent among these are the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, two independent federal agencies that fund research, programs, and initiatives in the arts and humanities. Many additional organizations that support and advocate for arts, sciences, and the liberal arts also play a significant role in supporting the humanities. These include the National Humanities Alliance, which is a coalition of colleges, universities, and other organizations that advocates for and promotes the value of the humanities, and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, which supports the Humanities Indicators project to track data on humanities across several categories, including undergraduate education.³ While these efforts do not have community colleges as their primary focus, their efforts contribute to broader efforts to strengthen and sustain humanities education across higher education sectors. In addition, through our interviews for this paper, we identified programs and initiatives that address the three specific challenges facing the humanities in community colleges discussed above.

Raising the visibility of humanities education in community colleges

Several organizations work to enhance the visibility of humanities education in community colleges; the most prominent among these is the Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) (<https://www.cchumanities.org/>). This national association of faculty and administrators is dedicated to strengthening and growing the humanities in two-year colleges, as well as creating awareness of the value of humanities education. CCHA facilitates the exchange of ideas on significant issues in humanities in higher education through national and regional conferences and seminars and through its journal, *Community College Humanities Review Journal*. Members have access to an online forum in which they can participate in discussions and circulate resources, such as

³ In 2017, the Humanities Indicators project conducted a survey on the numbers of community college students and faculty involved in humanities education (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, n.d.-d).

job postings. Additionally, the association actively pursues grants to promote the study of humanities.

Through fellowships and advocacy work, other organizations support the advancement of humanities in community colleges as part of their broader mission and work. For example, the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) (<https://www.aacu.org/>) advocates for and supports the improvement of liberal education, and over 120 community/technical colleges are members (American Association of Colleges & Universities, n.d.). In addition to its advocacy work, AAC&U offers resources and professional development for faculty. Programs in this area have included the development of learning outcomes for liberal education and a set of associated instructional resources and practices.

Scholarly societies in the humanities (and the social sciences) are federated in the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) (<https://www.acls.org/>), which has as its primary goal the circulation of humanistic knowledge and understanding. At a recent annual meeting, member societies agreed to prioritize increased representation of community colleges. This effort can be seen in their fellowship and grants program. Recognizing the vital role that community colleges play in the higher education ecosystem, ACLS received funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop the Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellowship that awards community college faculty up to \$40,000 to conduct a research project in their discipline. Twenty-six recipients were awarded the fellowship in 2019, representing the fields of anthropology, communications, English, history, political science, sociology, and others.

Supporting community college humanities faculty

Community college humanities faculty may pursue professional learning opportunities through their institution's center for teaching and learning and other institutional resources. In addition, several national organizations and initiatives provide supports for humanities faculty, including CCHA, AAC&U, and ACLS, described above. While most humanities disciplines do not have standalone organizations focused on the needs of community college faculty, by virtue of the size of its enrollments in community colleges, English is an exception. The Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) (<https://ncte.org/groups/tyca/>) has two primary goals: to identify and articulate the best

theories, practices, and pedagogy in teaching English in the two-year college, and to advocate on behalf of community college faculty on policy matters at the local and national level. Its journal, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, serves both functions with its theoretical, research-based, and practice-oriented articles on the teaching of English, as well as its white papers that address current issues in the profession and advocate for change. Additionally, TYCA aims to work with legislative and organizational policymakers at state, regional, and national levels to advocate for community college faculty and address the diverse needs of all students. TYCA hosts an annual conference in conjunction with the Conference on College Composition and Communication (<https://cccc.ncte.org/>).

Some other fields have made investments in ensuring that their community college faculty are represented and supported by a professional organization. For example, the American Historical Association (AHA) (<https://www.historians.org/>), which represents more than 12,000 members in a wide variety of professions, including higher education faculty, archivists, museum professionals, and secondary school teachers, has made active efforts to include community college faculty in their initiatives. Community college faculty have served in leadership roles in its History Gateways initiative, which revamps introductory college history courses to better serve students from all backgrounds. The 2020 AHA annual meeting was co-chaired by a community college faculty member, included a reception for two-year faculty to foster collegiality, and featured a number of sessions focused explicitly on teaching in community colleges, including a session that was organized in conjunction with CCHA.

The Mellon Foundation is a major sponsor of institution- and system-level initiatives to support faculty to enhance the humanities in community colleges. Its Community College–Research University Partnership (CCRUP) program provides funding to increase the student-transfer success rate from two- to four-year institutions and foster collaborations between humanities faculty in two- and four-year institutions (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, n.d.). For example, a CCRUP grant to the City University of New York (CUNY) Humanities Alliance has supported a range of activities, including fellowships that place humanities doctoral students in community colleges to increase their knowledge about diverse and inclusive classroom practices

prevalent in community colleges. Other institutions have similar Mellon-funded doctoral fellowship programs, including the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington.

In 2018, the CUNY Humanities Alliance hosted a conference entitled “Community Colleges and the Future of the Humanities” that included sessions on curriculum and pedagogy, as well as a range of topics of special interest to community college faculty, including guided pathways and student transfer. In 2019, the University of San Francisco and the Foothill-De Anza Community College District cohosted a Mellon-funded conference entitled “Bridging Humanities Across Disciplines” that focused on teaching in the humanities and strengthening two- and four-year partnerships to facilitate transfer in humanities fields. An additional focus of this meeting was the role and importance of humanities for students across programs of study, including STEM, business, and other fields. Convenings like these which facilitate collegiality, relationship-building, and sharing across institutions may offer a particular benefit for community college instructors from small colleges and/or small departments.

Given that two thirds of community college faculty are part-time, strategies to support faculty professional learning must be attentive to their distinctive needs. Off-campus conferences, particularly national meetings, are often exclusionary to part-time faculty who may not have institutional support to attend or may have other work or personal commitments that preclude their participation in multi-day off-site events. While not specific to humanities faculty, online professional development experiences, like those offered by the Faculty Guild (<https://www.facultyguild.org/>) and the Association of College and University Educators (<https://acue.org/>) offer learning resources that may be more accessible to part-time instructors. Initiatives like the Delphi Project (Pullias Center for Higher Education, n.d.) and organizations like Achieving the Dream (<https://www.achievingthedream.org/>) have invested in research and programming to address the specific needs of part-time and contingent faculty, critical stakeholders in humanities education in community colleges (Achieving the Dream, n.d.).

Strengthening transfer pathways in the humanities

Many states are working to enhance transfer pathways across two- and four-year sectors, although the extent to which humanities fields receive attention in these efforts

may vary. In one example, the Michigan Community College Association's Michigan Center for Student Success has partnered with the Michigan Association of State Universities and the Michigan Independent Colleges and Universities to build associate to bachelor's degree transfer pathways for 12 high-enrollment degree programs, including art, communications, and psychology (<https://www.mitransfer.net/>). Similar initiatives are underway in many states and regions, and some are supported by an ongoing Teagle Foundation initiative that has strengthening transfer access and enhancing the rigor and quality of liberal arts pathways at two- and four-year institutions as two of its goals (Teagle Foundation, n.d.). The Mellon Foundations' CCRUP grant recipients include the New Hampshire Humanities Collaborative, which has brought together faculty from the University of New Hampshire and from all seven of the state's community colleges to review course curricula in an effort to increase course transferability.

These efforts to improve humanities education in community college through advocacy, enhanced coordination across two- and four-year sectors, increased funding, and faculty support have the potential to improve humanities education for community college students. However, initiatives like those described in this section have limited research to draw on to inform their work.

7. A Call for More Research on Community College Humanities

In this paper, we have outlined in broad terms what is known about the humanities in community colleges with a particular focus on three challenges that are unique to this sector. We have also described initiatives working to address these issues. Yet there are many questions about humanities education in community colleges that remain unanswered, particularly with regard to strategies to support teaching and learning; the potential of whole-institution reforms known as guided pathways to improve outcomes; and the measurement of employment outcomes. In this section, we suggest possible new research in each of these areas.

Developing strategies to support community college humanities faculty

Faculty in community colleges—like their counterparts in four-year colleges and universities—often begin their careers with little formal training in pedagogy. Even seasoned faculty members may benefit from new ideas and enhanced support in response to technological change or new requirements, as occurred when the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly forced many instructors to teach online. Faculty in English, the area with the largest enrollments in the humanities, are being asked to redesign developmental and introductory courses as part of widespread reform efforts. Some community colleges offer professional development for faculty through centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) or an equivalent college entity to help faculty adopt new teaching tools and practices and receive constructive feedback from coaches and peers. Discussions with college leaders suggest that there are many different ways of organizing, operating, and financing CTLs. To date, there has been no systematic study of the strengths and limitations of different models, or what benefits CTLs may confer to faculty and students in the humanities. Case studies of well-established CTLs may help community colleges learn about the range of approaches that may be used to create a culture of teaching and learning excellence on their campuses.

Research on CTLs should be linked to research on effective instructional practices. Advances in the cognitive sciences have also shed light on how people learn and what teachers can do to foster learning in different settings (e.g., classroom versus online) and for students who have different levels of preparation or are at different life stages (e.g., a recent high school graduate versus an adult in their 30s or 40s) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). To build more robust information about how students learn, humanities fields may look to the National Science Foundation-funded Discipline-Based Educational Research project, which has synthesized empirical education research in several science fields, with particular attention to how students learn and adopt key concepts, practices, and ways of thinking in particular disciplines (Singer et al., 2012). While individual humanities disciplines have long histories of researching educational practices and implementing culturally responsive and equity-oriented instructional practices, bringing discrete pieces of evidence together with a focus on student learning at the lower-division undergraduate

level would provide a strong foundation for designing effective professional development infrastructure for community college faculty.

Examining the potential of guided pathways reforms to improve student outcomes in the humanities

Most students who enroll in community colleges fail to earn a credential within six years. One explanation for the low completion rate is that community colleges generally do a poor job of helping students make sense of the wide variety of programs of study that are offered, and of providing students with the ongoing guidance and support they need to be successful (Bailey et al., 2015). To bring more coherence to the student experience and improve completion and other outcomes, many institutions have been begun implementing whole-college reforms known as guided pathways. These reforms include “backward mapping” of recommended course sequences and activities in programs of study so that they lead both to efficient program completion and to clear opportunities for employment and further education; redesigning student onboarding, academic advising, and other support services to help students select and stay on a program path; and implementing strategies to ensure that students are engaged in learning and acquire the skills they need to succeed in careers and further education (Jenkins et al., 2018).

In an evaluation funded by the National Science Foundation, CCRC is investigating whether and how guided pathways leads to better outcomes for students in science, engineering, technology, and math (STEM) fields (Community College Research Center, n.d.). The study is taking place in three states where colleges have made varying degrees of progress in implementing guided pathways reforms. Researchers are capitalizing on this variation to determine whether institutions that fully adopt guided pathways reforms show greater improvement on indicators of students’ academic progress than institutions that have made some or no progress in implementing guided pathways, and to see if institutions that adopt guided pathways produce better results over time as reforms are institutionalized. The NSF-funded study is focused on STEM outcomes (e.g., the numbers of students who complete gateway math and science courses, and who make steady progress toward degrees in fields like biology, allied health, and information technology). A comparable study could be designed to examine student

outcomes in the humanities. A good place to start would be to understand how colleges that adopt guided pathways inform incoming students about their options in the humanities, and what humanities majors need to do—and what guidance they receive—to prepare for careers and/or transfer to four-year institutions.

Measuring the employment outcomes for students in the humanities

Pippins and Belfield (2019) find that grades in humanities and liberal arts courses at community colleges are a strong predictor of whether students transfer and how well they perform at four-year institutions, but there is limited research on the specific community college course-taking patterns or degree programs in the humanities that are associated with positive labor market outcomes. It is generally assumed that humanities courses convey a set of essential workplace skills, including those associated with communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. In states that allow individual student records to be linked to employment data, researchers may examine the relationship between humanities coursework and degree completion with measures of employment, earnings, job stability, and earnings growth. Researchers may also disaggregate results by race/ethnicity, age, gender, and other characteristics to determine whether some groups derive greater or lesser benefit from humanities coursework and degrees from community colleges. Of particular interest would be to understand whether certain patterns of course-taking or degrees in the humanities are associated with better-than-average labor market outcomes and whether they help to reduce earnings gaps between socio-demographic groups working in particular industries or fields.

Research using administrative data may be paired with other methods to establish a richer picture of the role of humanities coursework in community colleges. These might include qualitative study of student experiences in community college humanities courses and descriptive analyses of the job-related skills that students are expected to learn. Case study research on states and systems that have built strong transfer pathways in the humanities, and the associated labor market outcomes, may be instructive for others seeking to improve the “patchwork” of humanities course requirements described elsewhere (Pippins & Belfield, 2019). Together, these inquiries can help to establish the importance of humanities coursework in community colleges both for students pursuing terminal degrees and students intending to transfer. A richer understanding of student

trajectories may help identify factors that lead to greater long-term success for community college students as they pursue their academic and career goals, and reinforce efforts by colleges to strengthen their humanities programming.

Research on these three broad topics—supports for faculty, guided pathways reforms, and long-term outcomes for students—can both increase the visibility of community college humanities education and provide guidance and direction for improvement. In our current moment, which is marked by global interconnectedness and rapid and often unpredictable change, the critical importance of developing students’ understanding of culture and expression, empathy, and thinking and communication skills should not be underestimated. Recent research points to the sizeable role community colleges play in delivering postsecondary humanities education, particularly for students from groups traditionally excluded from higher education. Thus, additional investment and attention in this area has the potential both to improve student outcomes and to strengthen the humanities within and beyond the community college context.

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Appendix

The following informants were instrumental in supporting our inquiry into the humanities in community colleges. Via email and phone, they suggested resources, provided their perspectives on the opportunities and challenges facing the humanities, and described programs and initiatives in this area. We are grateful for their assistance.

Name	Title and Affiliation
Isis Artze-Vega	Vice President for Academic Affairs, Valencia College
Rachel Bernard	Senior Program Officer, American Council of Learned Societies
Sal Breiter	Humanities Co-Chair, De Anza College
Falk Cammin	Humanities Mellon Scholars Program Director, Foothill College
Peter Felten	Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, Elon University
Laura Gambino	Vice President, New England Commission of Higher Education
Eric Hoffman	Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, LaGuardia Community College
Sujung Kim	Postdoctoral Fellow, CUNY Humanities Alliance
Emily Lardner	Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs, Highline College
Andrew Rusnak	Executive Director, Community College Humanities Association
Jenny Schanker	Director of Research and Institutional Practice, Michigan Community College Association
Emily Swafford	Director of Academic and Professional Affairs, American Historical Association