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Humanities and Liberal Arts Education Across America's Colleges

How Much Is There?

By Theo Pippins, Clive R. Belfield, and Thomas Bailey

Humanities and liberal arts—the study and interpretation of languages, literature, and modes of inquiry that have "humanistic content and employ humanistic methods"[1]—are a significant and vital part of postsecondary education. Coursework in these fields enhances students' skills as writers, communicators, and thinkers; it also provides valuable direct skills for work (Nussbaum, 2016; Anders, 2017; Stross, 2017). Nevertheless, discussion of the role of the humanities and liberal arts is often dominated by a pervasive sense of decline. To take one example from the Opinion pages of *The New York Times*: "History is on the ebb. Philosophy is on the ropes. And comparative literature? Please. It's an intellectual heirloom: cherished by those who can afford such baubles but disposable in the eyes of others" (Bruni, 2018). This opinion may reflect perceptions regarding several forces, including, perhaps, the decline in faculty pay, the downgrading of the social utility of humanism, or even the consistent drumbeat to invest in STEM (Hillis Miller, 2014). These forces are perceived to be strong and adverse. But their actual strength is open to question; there has been very little systematic accounting of the extent of humanities and liberal arts education in U.S. colleges. One objective way to measure the status of the humanities and liberal arts is to look at patterns of student participation in these fields. Here too, a clear sense of decline often pervades. A recent study, for example, describes students "abandoning humanities" and creating a "crisis" (Schmidt, 2018), but that study looks only at four-year colleges and not the entire system of humanities and liberal arts education provided by U.S. colleges. As we show below, the overall picture is quite different.

Humanities and liberal arts are a significant and vital part of postsecondary education. Nevertheless, discussion of the role of the humanities and liberal arts is often dominated by a pervasive sense of decline.

In this report, we provide a systematic and comprehensive accounting of the provision of humanities and liberal arts education (hereafter "HLA") by U.S. public higher education institutions. We account for all undergraduate HLA across all public colleges. Notably, we include HLA at community colleges: These colleges represent the largest postsecondary sector, larger even than the public four-year sector when part-time students are considered, serving over six million undergraduates each fall (Ma & Baum, 2016; Wang, 2012). We report on the state of

HLA in several forms: degrees awarded, enrollments by major, course requirements, and coursework completed. We track absolute numbers and shares, and we compare these patterns to those in non-HLA subjects. Overall, our descriptions provide a comprehensive picture of HLA across the U.S. public college system.

Recently, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences produced survey evidence on the extent of humanities education across U.S. community colleges by asking public two-year institutions to report how many students took humanities courses in fall 2015 (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2019). The survey found that the colleges offer a substantial number of humanities courses across a range of disciplines. Community colleges reported that 2.8 million students (over 40 percent of all students they enrolled) took at least one humanities course during that semester. One quarter of these courses were in English, and approximately 10 percent of the courses were taken by high school students who were dual enrollees at a community college. Overall, this new study affirms our research findings: It highlights the extent of HLA coursework spread across disciplines at community colleges; it also serves to juxtapose the extent of HLA coursework at two-year and four-year colleges.

Key Findings

- Humanities and liberal arts education in America's colleges is not in decline. Across the nation's community colleges, the number and share of HLA degrees awarded annually has risen since 2000. Although over the past 15 years the share of bachelor's degrees awarded at four-year public colleges in HLA has fallen, the absolute number of HLA degrees awarded at two-year and four-year public colleges combined has risen. And the numbers and shares of declared HLA majors at two- and four-year public colleges have roughly held steady, accounting for the Great Recession, since 2007.
- College requirements for HLA are best described as a "patchwork." They are based on a complex mix of interwoven college and program requirements, and they allow students considerable flexibility as to the amount of HLA they take in college.
- All degrees, regardless of subject matter, involve a significant proportion of coursework in HLA. Almost one quarter of coursework for a four-year STEM degree is in HLA.
- Visual and performing arts is becoming the dominant field within HLA. Community college graduates take as much coursework in visual and performing arts as they do in English or all other HLA courses combined. At four-year colleges, a growing proportion of bachelor's degrees are in visual and performing arts. This field has supplanted English language and literature as the most popular HLA degree.
- Community college transfer students are an important group of HLA students. They complete as much HLA as native four-year college students, but most of that HLA is taken before they transfer. It is critical to determine if these students are prepared for HLA coursework at four-year colleges.

However, in order to describe the "decline" in humanities (or the lack of one), it is necessary to have evidence over time, and in order to understand how students accumulate credits, it is necessary to have longitudinal information on students during their entire time in college. In our analysis, we focus on both these temporal aspects: trends over time, and degrees, majors, and coursework during students' careers in college.

Humanities and Liberal Arts Subjects

HLA includes a range of college subjects. For this study, we follow the designation by the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act. Specifically, HLA consists of the study and interpretation of:

> *modern and classical languages; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life. (National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, Sec. 3a)*

This definition can be readily translated into college courses. There are typically 18 course codes for HLA in college transcripts, which are listed in Appendix Table A1. These courses codes are used in our analysis. (We include both college-level and remedial HLA courses.)

One important issue is whether HLA should include courses with limited theoretical focus. In particular, colleges have significantly increased their programs in visual and performing arts (VPA). These VPA programs may reasonably be excluded from the HLA category if they focus only on building practical or vocational skills (leading to, e.g., a certificate to become a licensed photographer). As the inclusion of all VPA courses is open to debate and because VPA coursework has grown in recent years, we report statistics with and without VPA coursework.

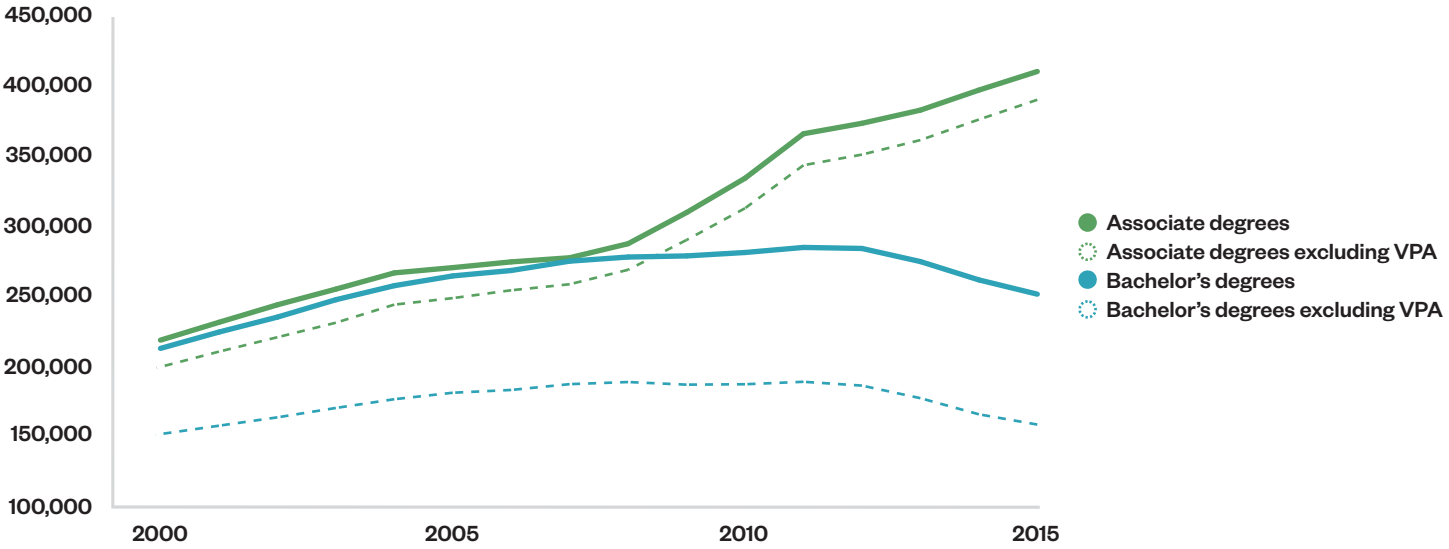
One important issue is whether HLA should include courses with limited theoretical focus.

Degrees Awarded in HLA

Degree completion is the primary measure of higher education provision. Degree award trends in HLA are shown in Figure 1 (solid line). The number of associate and bachelor's degrees awarded annually by all U.S. public postsecondary institutions in HLA subjects has grown since 2000,[2] when a total of 218,000 HLA associate degrees were awarded. By 2015, the number had increased by 88 percent, to 410,000. In 2000, a total of 213,000 HLA bachelor's degrees were awarded; by 2015, the number had increased by 18 percent, to 251,000. Degree award trends excluding VPA programs are also shown in Figure 1 (dotted line). The absolute growth in HLA associate degrees is unaffected by the inclusion of VPA degrees.

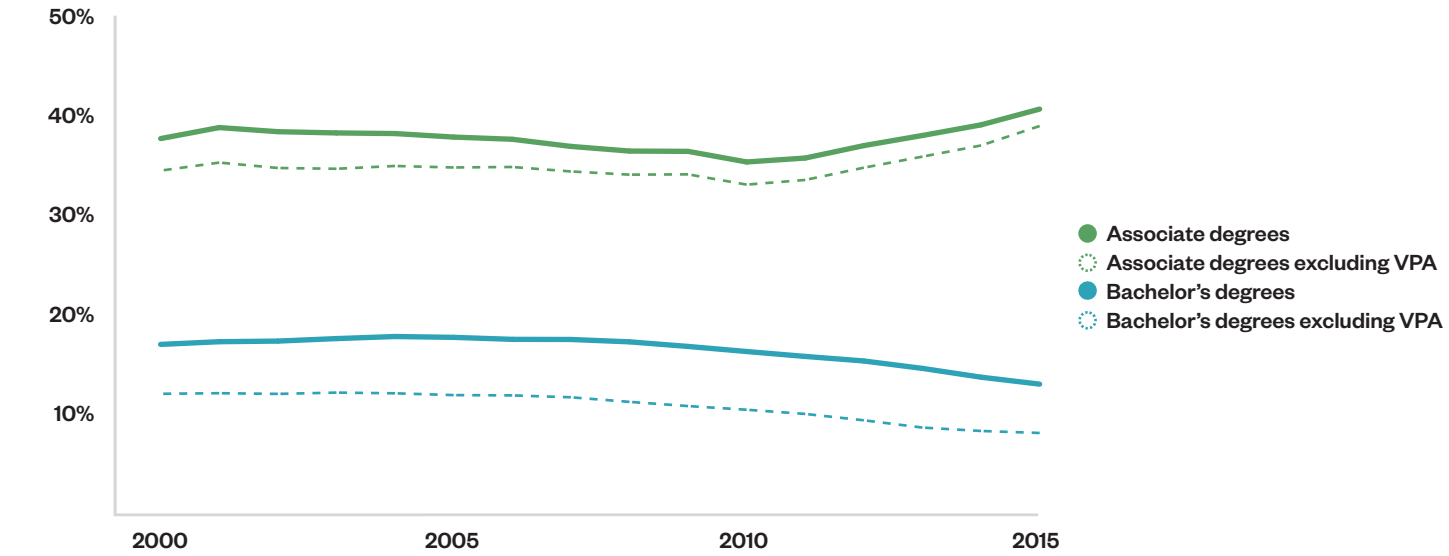
However, the absolute growth in HLA bachelor's degrees is more muted without VPA degrees. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of bachelor's degrees in HLA (not counting VPA) grew only very slightly, by 4 percent.

Figure 1.
Number of HLA Degrees Awarded by U.S. Public Colleges



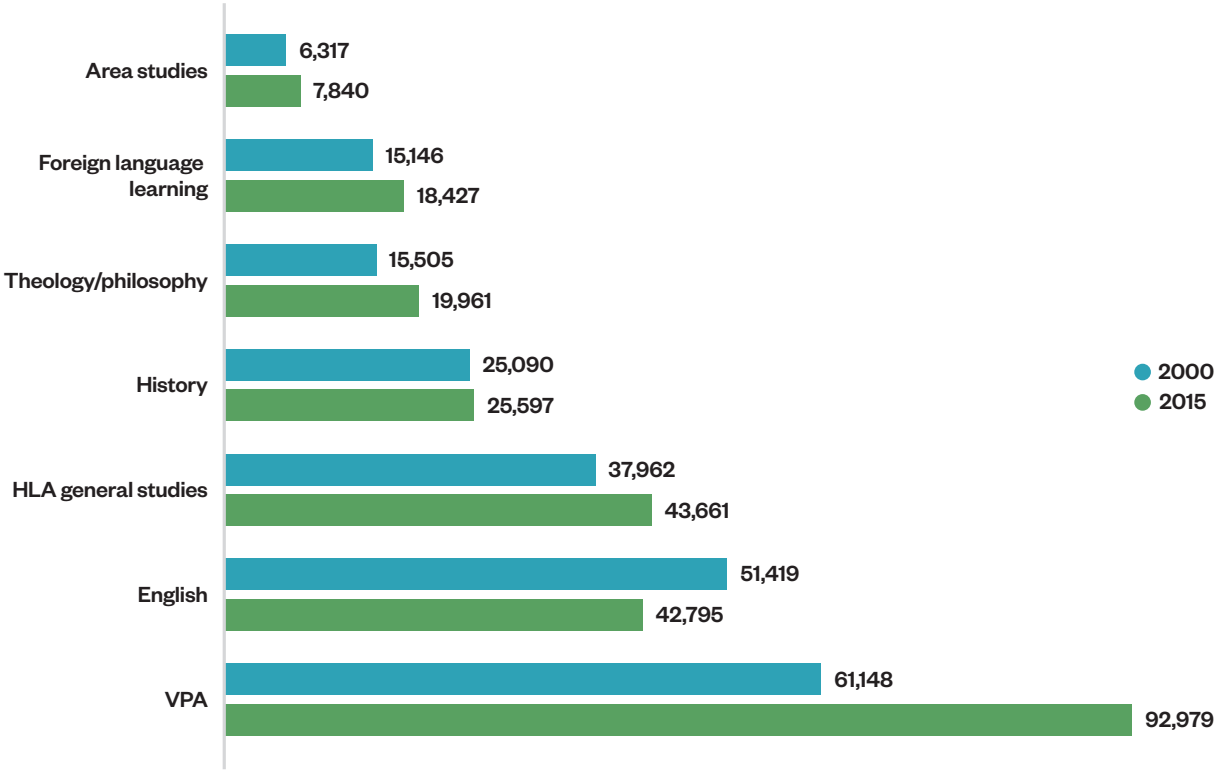
The share of degrees in HLA versus other subjects has remained stable, although the composition of those HLA degrees has shifted. HLA degree shares are shown in Figure 2 (solid line includes all fields; dotted line excludes VPA fields). The proportion of all associate degrees that were in HLA increased from 38 percent to 41 percent between 2000 and 2015; the gain is equivalent if VPA fields are excluded. In contrast, the proportion of bachelor's degrees fell from 17 percent to 13 percent; excluding VPA, the share fell from 12 percent to 8 percent, i.e., by one third.

Figure 2.
HLA Share of All Degrees Awarded



Almost all HLA associate degrees are awarded under the general title of humanities and liberal arts or general studies (with fewer than 5 percent in VPA and fewer than 5 percent in all other HLA fields). By contrast, HLA bachelor's degrees are awarded in a range of subjects. Figure 3 shows the range of HLA subjects for bachelor's degrees for the years 2000 and 2015. In 2000, the two most common HLA subjects for bachelor's degrees were English and VPA; roughly similar numbers of degrees were awarded in these two subjects. However, by 2015, the number of VPA degrees had risen substantially (by more than 50 percent) and the number of degrees in English had fallen (by 17 percent). By 2015, VPA degrees represented more than one third of all HLA bachelor's degrees.

Figure 3.
HLA Bachelor's Degrees Awarded by Field

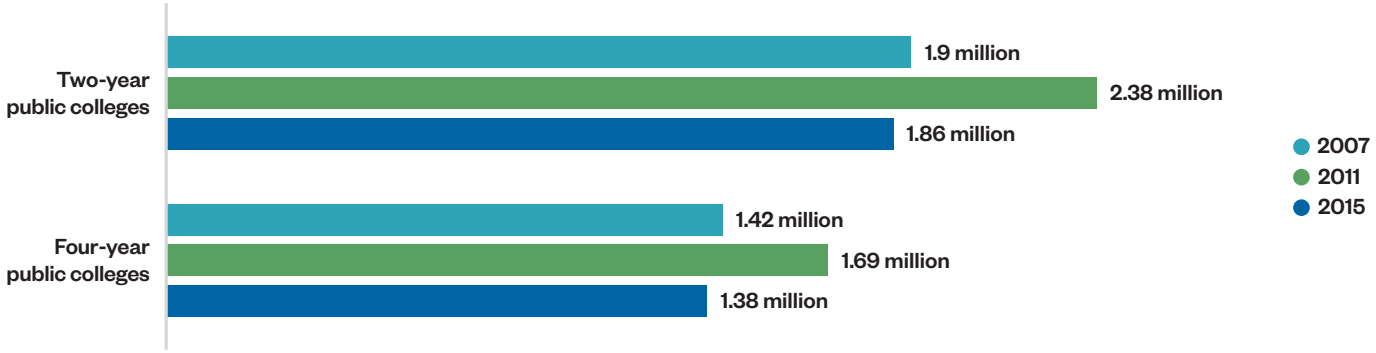


Overall, degree completion rates do not indicate that students are abandoning the humanities. In absolute numbers, there has clearly been an aggregate increase in degrees awarded in HLA.[3] However, the trends in shares differ across two-year and four-year colleges. Whereas the share of all associate degrees in HLA has increased, the share of bachelor's degrees in HLA has decreased, especially if VPA fields are excluded. Also, degrees in VPA have grown in prominence at four-year colleges.

College Majors in HLA

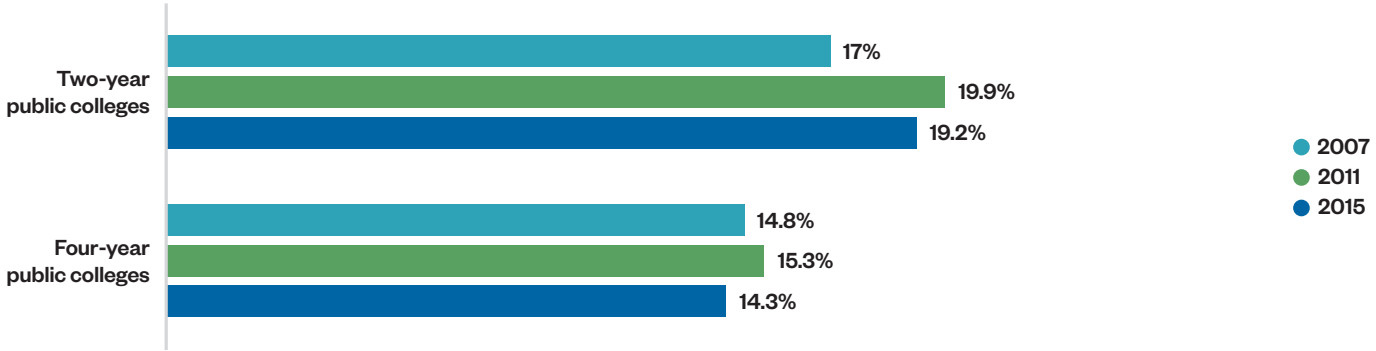
Majors are a useful indicator of the status of HLA across U.S. public colleges. National data indicate that the absolute number of students who declare as HLA majors has remained steady after accounting for the recent economic cycle (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, Tables 302 and 303). Undergraduate HLA majors are shown in Figure 4. In 2007, 1.9 million undergraduates were enrolled in HLA majors at community colleges. By 2011, when the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession led to an increase in community college enrollments, this number had risen to 2.38 million. By 2015, HLA majors were back down to 1.86 million, i.e., just below the pre-recession number. Similarly, 1.42 million students were enrolled in HLA majors at public four-year colleges in 2007; by 2011, there were 1.69 million; and by 2015, the number had reverted back to 1.38 million.

Figure 4.
HLA Majors Declared



The share of students who reported HLA as their major also rose and fell with the economic cycle. This is shown in Figure 5. In 2007, 17 percent of all majors at community colleges were in HLA; by 2011, the share had risen to 20 percent; by 2015, the share had reverted slightly to 19 percent. Similarly, the share of all majors at four-year colleges in HLA rose from 14.8 percent to 15.3 percent, before declining modestly to 14.3 percent.

Figure 5.
HLA Share of All Majors Declared



Major declarations are only an approximate indicator of the extent of HLA in colleges. Many students do not declare a major; many others either switch majors or do not follow the requirements of their major. Nevertheless, as a measure of students' intentions, HLA majors at both two-year and four-year public colleges are not in sharp decline either in absolute numbers or relative to other disciplines.

Coursework Requirements in HLA

Almost all colleges require some HLA coursework for all students, regardless of declared major. A review of these requirements illustrates the extent of HLA coursework that is expected for college students.

Looking across three states (California, Ohio, and Texas), the HLA course requirements for two- and four-year public colleges are complex and varied. (These requirements are tabulated in Appendix Table A2; they are separate from requirements for majors in HLA). There is considerable scope for students—even if they follow the requirements—to progress through college with very different amounts of HLA coursework.[4] There are multiple types of HLA requirements; these include general college requirements, requirements for associate degrees, and requirements for bachelor's degrees. Requirements shown in the table are expressed as minima: Colleges can mandate extra HLA coursework. HLA requirements span many subjects (e.g., coursework in government/U.S. history) and are, in some cases, bundled with non-HLA subjects. Requirements also vary across college systems and individual colleges. Finally, HLA requirements are not static across cohorts: As college systems change their core curriculum or transfer articulation agreements, HLA requirements may also change.

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Overall, there are many different ways to satisfy various HLA requirements in college. Unsurprisingly, this means that HLA coursework taken by students only very indirectly corresponds with what colleges might require or expect.

Course Enrollments in HLA

Ultimately, enrollments in courses are evidence of the actual amount of HLA being taught in colleges. Students enroll in HLA courses even if they are not HLA majors, and HLA majors enroll in non-HLA courses. Plus, of course, many students do not complete their programs of study. For complete information on students' time in college, it is necessary to look at student transcripts.

Data on Course Enrollments

National evidence is not available on college coursework by subject. Transcript-level evidence across individual students is necessary. We use transcript-level evidence from three datasets. Two of the datasets are from statewide community college

systems, and the third is from a nationally representative survey. The state-level datasets include all students attending community colleges within each state, and one of them includes information on students if they enroll at a public four-year college in-state. One of the states is a large state with over 25,000 students per year across more than 20 community colleges. The other state is a large Western state with over 35,000 students across more than 30 community colleges. Both states are close to (but slightly above) the national average in terms of high school graduation rate and median household income. For this analysis, the 2012 entering cohort of first-time-in-college students is tracked with transcript data up to 2017. For one state, the community college cohort can be compared to students starting at public four-year colleges. Together, these datasets provide a comprehensive description of all students who start community college in a given year.

The third dataset for analysis is the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS). The ELS is a nationally representative survey of 16,700 students who were in 10th grade in 2002. These students were given several follow-up questionnaires over time, most recently in 2012, by which time almost all of them had terminated their postsecondary education. The ELS includes detailed information on all courses taken at all colleges by over 8,000 students. The ELS involves a single age group of students (whereas colleges enroll students of various ages) during a single economic time period. However, it does have information on all colleges attended, including both in-state and out-of-state public institutions.

Each student at a community college earns fewer than ten credits on average each year. Slightly below 20 percent of these credits are in HLA.

These three datasets capture evidence on HLA at public colleges from different perspectives. The statewide datasets include all entrants, regardless of age, but do not include information if students move out of state. These datasets provide evidence that reflects the demographics of students within those states. The ELS is detailed longitudinal data closely tracking a small group of students of a specific age (who were around 20 when they entered college); it is also weighted to represent the national population of high school students during the 2000s. Below, we report average estimates from the three datasets (although, in fact, the results from each dataset are quite similar).

Transcripts yield the finest level of detail on what coursework students undertake in college. However, for each cohort, it is necessary to have multiple years of transcript data. (For community college students who entered college in 2010, transcripts are needed to cover the years 2010 through 2013 for associate degrees and through 2016 for bachelor's degrees.) Thus, it is not possible to report across many cohorts of students, and the trend in HLA coursework cannot be determined.

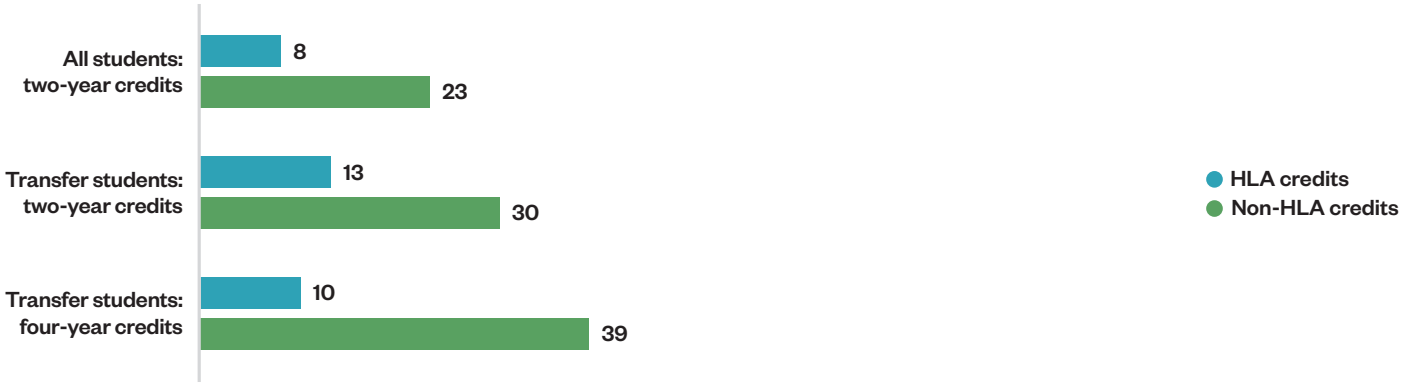
Credit Accumulation

Each student at a community college earns fewer than ten credits on average each year (based on statewide data from cohorts from 2012 to 2017). Slightly below 20 percent of these credits are in HLA. Each student at a public four-year college earns an average of approximately 25 credits per year. Slightly more than 20 percent of

these credits are in HLA. Therefore, across U.S. public colleges, roughly 20 percent of all courses taken are in HLA.

Credit accumulation across students' time when in college is shown in Figure 6. (The numbers are averaged across the three datasets.) During their entire time in community college, the average student accumulates 31 credits. These credits are divided into 8 HLA credits and 23 non-HLA credits. Therefore, one quarter of all credits each student earns are in HLA. Students who transfer to a public four-year college take and complete more courses: On average, they accumulate 43 community college credits, of which just under one third are in HLA. These transfer students earn an additional 49 credits at a four-year college; approximately 20 percent of these credits are in HLA. Hence, transfer students complete substantially more HLA courses than other community college students, and they proceed to complete a significant amount of HLA coursework at their subsequent four-year college.

Figure 6.
Average Credits Accumulated by Students Starting in Community College



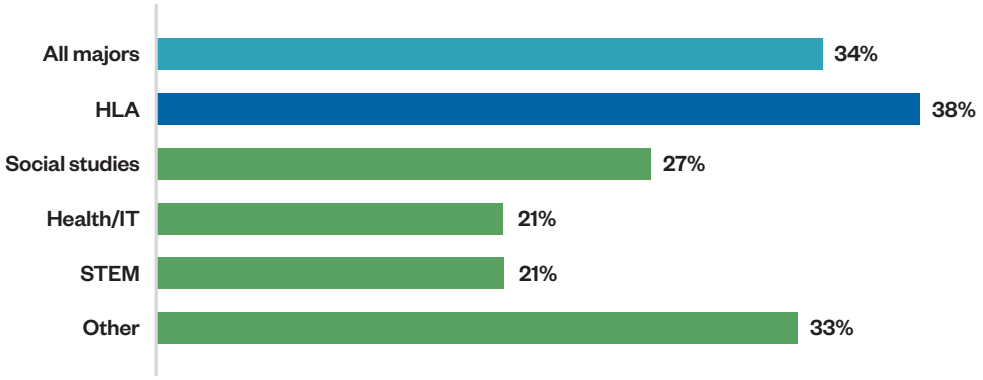
The HLA coursework completed by community college transfer students is almost identical to that of native four-year college students. The distribution of credits across these two student groups is shown in Figure 7 (averaged across one state dataset and the ELS). In total, community college transfer students accumulate 23 HLA credits out of a total of 92 credits. By comparison, students who start at public four-year colleges earn 91 credits, of which 21 are in HLA.

Figure 7.
Average Total Credits Accumulated by Transfer and Native Four-Year College Students

Students who complete an associate degree in almost any subject complete a significant amount of HLA coursework. Figure 8 shows the proportions of each associate degree that is composed of HLA coursework. On average, each associate degree is composed of one-third (34 percent) HLA credits. For associate degrees in HLA, that proportion is unsurprisingly higher (at 38 percent). Similarly, for associate degrees in non-HLA subjects, the amount of HLA coursework is unsurprisingly lower (at 21 percent for degrees in health/IT and STEM fields). However, the evidence in Figure 8 affirms that all associate degree holders complete a significant amount of HLA coursework. Even if large fractions of the student population shifted toward majors in business, health/IT, or STEM, there would still be a substantial amount of HLA coursework.[5]

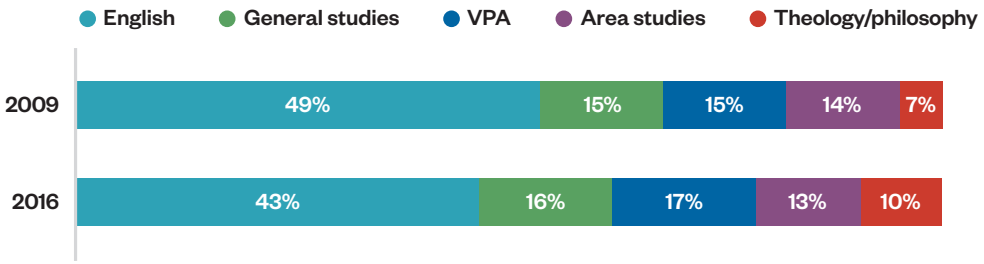
Figure 8.

HLA Share of All Credits Earned by Associate Degree Completers by Major



Finally, it is possible to look more deeply within each degree program area to identify the specific HLA courses that students are completing. Figure 9 shows a more detailed breakdown by subject of all HLA credits students earned at community colleges in 2009 and 2016. Almost half of all HLA credits were in English; the remainder were divided roughly evenly into credits in general studies, VPA, languages other than English (LOTE), and history and area studies, and with fewer in philosophy/theology. Between 2009 and 2016, the division changed modestly: The proportion of credits in English declined by 6 percentage points; these credits shifted across the other four subject areas. Although most of the credits in HLA are in English, these credits are spread across all students (most likely as college-wide requirements). For students who attend community college for multiple years and for those who complete associate degrees, the coursework pattern shifts toward other subjects: Specifically, for these students, the proportion of courses in VPA is much higher, at approximately one third of all HLA courses.

Figure 9.
Proportion of HLA Credits Earned at Community Colleges by Field



Conclusion

Measured by degrees, majors, and coursework, the humanities and liberal arts represent a large, robust part of the U.S. postsecondary sector. Indeed, looking at HLA in community colleges, the status of HLA is improving even if visual and performing arts courses are excluded. Overall, the depiction of a set of disciplines in "decline" or "crisis" appears overblown, certainly in absolute terms. A large proportion of all college students receive a significant amount of HLA instruction. Moreover, there is a considerable buffer: HLA degrees are not composed entirely of HLA coursework, and non-HLA degrees require some amount of HLA coursework. Even with modest trends away from HLA majors or HLA awards, there will still be a significant amount of HLA coursework. For example, if a student switches from HLA to STEM and completes a four-year bachelor's degree, the absolute reduction in HLA credits is approximately 6 credits per year.

This description of HLA highlights an important issue: the articulation between HLA at two-year and four-year colleges. HLA in community colleges is substantial, even as course requirements are far from straightforward, and as many students transfer. Therefore, HLA in community colleges needs to be linked more clearly to HLA in four-year colleges. Progress could take many forms, including increased information about whether HLA credits are transferable; about whether HLA courses are well-articulated in terms of content, instructional mode, or faculty expectations; and about whether HLA degree programs are aligned (e.g., between "general studies" at community college and VPA at four-year colleges). The quality of articulation in HLA between two- and four-year colleges remains to be investigated using empirical methods. Understanding—and enhancing—this articulation will make a significant contribution to improvements in HLA education across U.S. colleges.

The depiction of HLA as a set of disciplines in "decline" or "crisis" appears overblown, certainly in absolute terms. A large proportion of all college students receive a significant amount of HLA instruction.

Endnotes

1. We provide a fuller definition from the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 just below.
2. Data on degree attainment is from U.S. Department of Education (2017).
3. This holds even if associate degrees are weighted 0.5 per bachelor's degree.
4. Many students do not follow the requirements. Community college programs are often complex and confusing, especially for students who start college without having determined their program or who intend to transfer to a four-year college (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).
5. These conclusions are re-affirmed if associate degree titles are used. For example, the average associate degree in sciences (AS degree) is composed of 25 percent HLA coursework, and the average associate degree in applied sciences (AAS degree) is composed of 16 percent HLA coursework.

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Appendix

Table A1.
Course Codes for HLA in College Transcripts

HLA COURSES	
1.	Anthropology and archaeology
2.	Area/cultural/ethnic/gender studies
3.	Art history
4.	Classics
5.	Geography and population studies
6.	English
7.	Film, cinema, and media studies
8.	Musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory
9.	Foreign languages and literatures
10.	History
11.	Linguistics
12.	Literature
13.	Performance studies
14.	Philosophy and political theory
15.	Religion and theology
16.	Sociology
17.	Theater
18.	Interdisciplinary studies

Table A2.

HLA Requirements for Three Statewide College Systems: Number of Semester Credits

	Core curriculum / general education requirements				Associate degree requirements			Bachelor's degree requirements			
	CA		OH	TX	CA[a]	OH	TX	CA		OH	TX
	CSU	UC						CSU	UC		
English rhetoric and composition	9	6	3	6	3	3	6	9[b]	6[b]	6[b]	6
Math concepts, statistics, logic	3	3	3	3		3	3	3[b]	3[b]	6[b]	3
Art and humanities	9	9	6	3	3	6	3	9[b]	9[b]	6[b]	3
Visual and performing arts				3			3				3
Government and U.S. history[c]				12			12				12
Proficiency in language other than English		✔							✔		
Social and behavioral sciences	9	9	6	3	3	6	3	9[b]	9[b]	6[b]	3
Physical and biological (natural) sciences	6	6	6	6	3	6	6	6[b]	6[b]	10[b]	6
Institutional-designated options[c]			✔	✔		✔	✔			✔	✔
General education requirements								48-51[a]		46-69	42
Major requirements					18	25-30[d]	18	48-57		30+	36+
Total credits / semester units required	34-36	33+	36-40	42	60	60+	60	120		120	120

Sources: www.cccco.edu (California), www.ohiohighered.org/transfer/policy (Ohio), www.thecb.state.tx.us/apps/tcc/ (Texas)

Note: ✔ indicates required. Associate degrees require 60 credits in each state; bachelor's degrees require 120 credits. CSU: California State University; UC: University of California system.

[a] Minimum legal requirements; variance by campus type per associate degree general education requirements.
[b] Credits vary per college in each category. All colleges adhere to these minimum amounts.
[c] Higher requirement if transfer college option included.
[d] Applies to all majors; students obtain general AA or AS degree.

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