

Pathways and Barriers to the Humanities: The Perspectives of High School and College Students

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Young people are the biggest stakeholders in their own education. Yet we know little about how current students approach key issues such as what courses to take, whether to attend college, and how these choices fit into broader goals for their personal and professional lives. Students have their own thought-out perspectives on the humanities, and they think about the field not only as part of their educational journey but also as part of their development as whole people. Bolstering our understanding of what draws students to or repels them from humanities education is key if the field is to flourish. To do so, the Humanities Indicators (HI) at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences contracted the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to conduct a series of interviews and focus groups with college and high school students.

The focus groups and interviews were designed to identify topics and themes that the HI hopes to explore more systematically in a future survey, which will yield nationally representative findings. However, these preliminary interviews offer important insights into the cross-currents and challenges facing the humanities as today's students transition into and through college.

For this study, NORC first conducted four focus groups with high school students in April and May 2025—two in person and two virtually. The two virtual sessions

featured one group of ninth- and tenth-grade students and one group of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students. They held an in-person session for ninth and tenth graders in Washington, D.C., and an in-person session for eleventh and twelfth graders in Chicago. From September to November 2025, NORC also conducted twenty-five in-depth virtual interviews with college

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students, focusing on students who were either undecided or were majoring in the humanities. For both the focus groups and the interviews, NORC recruited students across a variety of demographic dimensions, including gender, race, urbanicity, and parent education level. The students were asked to share their thoughts on five topics related to decisions about whether or not to major in the humanities:

- Reading and writing outside work or school;
- Favorite and least-favorite subjects in high school and college;

- The decision to attend college;
- What course(s) of study to pursue in college; and
- The perceived role and value of the humanities.

Reading and Writing for Fun

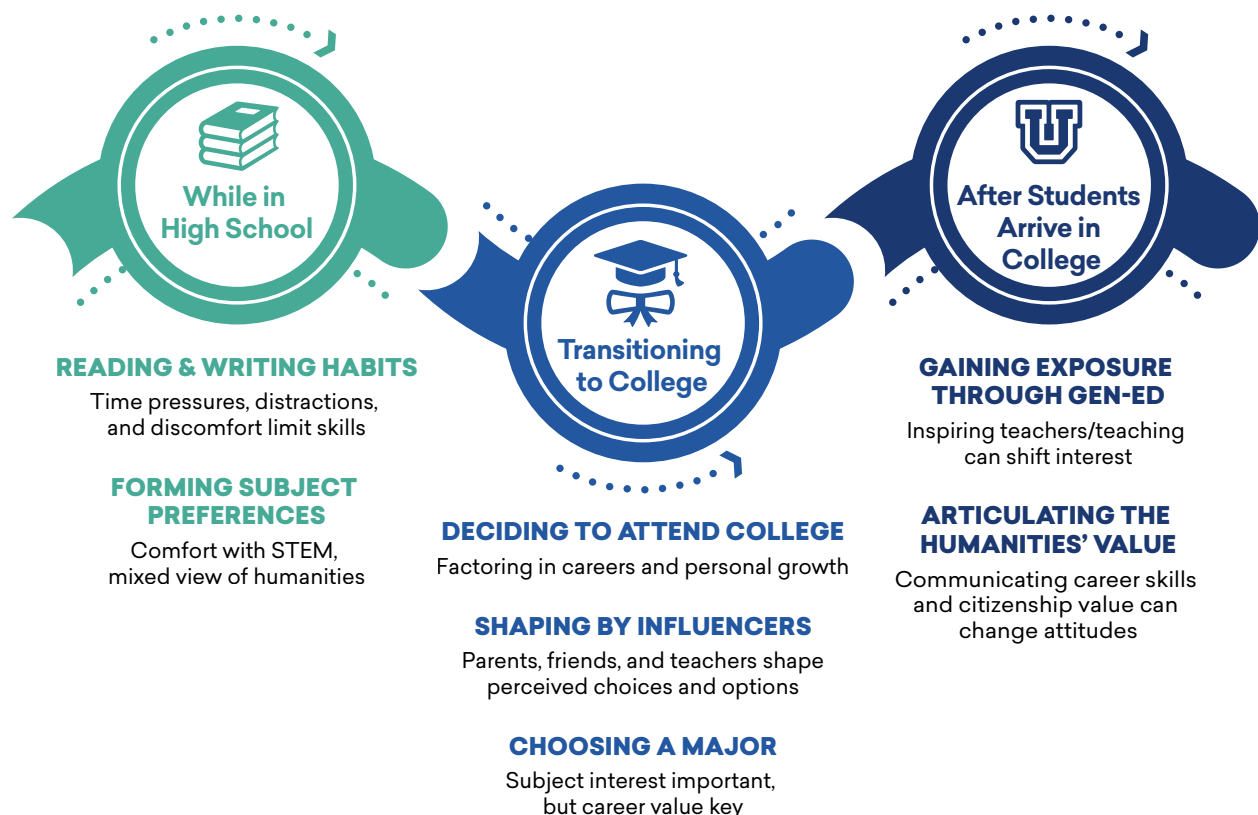
Students' skills in and experience with reading and writing for fun have long been at the center of the discussion about how students come to be interested in and appreciate the disciplines that make up the humanities. Since text remains a foundational part of work in the college humanities, a portion of each interview focused on questions about students' reading and writing habits outside work or school. Most of the students—regardless of their age or stage in education—did not read or write for fun, and many of them noted that their friends did not do so either.

Reading

While a few of the students dismissed reading as “just a waste of time,”¹ the most common reason for not reading for fun across all students was a *lack* of time, largely due to the demands of their academic work. Two high school students noticed that the older they get, the less they read for fun; they pointed to the impact of academic and extracurricular demands on student time. Some students also pointed to difficulty finding something that could hold their attention and focus, with one student observing, “Whenever I start reading, I always find it so difficult because I always skip ahead a few words and I go back.”² Another student offered, “I feel like I’m not really good at paying attention, like getting down what I’m reading.”³

Though some students noted a lack of interest in reading in general, others expressed regret that they

Factors Shaping Student Interest in a Humanities Major



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were not able to read more. One high school student said, “I don’t really read for fun, but not because I don’t want to. It’s just because I literally don’t have time. I come from school. I do my homework. I do sports and then sleep.”⁴ Some pointed to their phones as distractions: “I don’t read as much either but the books I do have, I will revisit . . . if I feel like I’ve been on my phone too much.”⁵

This feeling appears to persist into college. When asked whether they read for fun, one college student said, “When school is in session, rarely. Like, and it’s unfortunate, I wish it were more. It’s just a lot of reading for the classes already, so . . . the time I would be able to freely read, I kind of want to go on my phone.”⁶ Another student pointed to a wider set of reasons for

an influence and instead followed their own interests, while others mentioned friends and family. A substantial number of high school and college students mentioned social media as an influence, with college students calling out TikTok specifically—and not just for book recommendations but also for sparking their interest in reading. One college student described their experience with TikTok as “the thing that got me to read in the first place.”⁸ Others pointed to films or television shows that prompted them to pick up a related book (and, in one case, the script for the original play on which a film was based).

Even as some students used digital media for discovery, most of the high school and college student readers reported preferring physical books over e-books, citing a greater connection afforded by the physical format and the potential for distraction associated with electronic formats. As one student noted, “I feel like finishing a paper book is way more satisfying than finishing a book online.” Some of the high school students noted that they preferred to listen to audiobooks because the narrator can “read it more fluently and better.”⁹ But even among those who liked audiobooks, almost all of them indicated they wanted to have a physical copy to engage with alongside the audio.

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their declining reading habits: “I feel like my attention span has shortened even more especially ever since COVID and the lockdown, with TikTok and just being on your phone all the time.”⁷ Other reasons for not reading for fun expressed by both high school and college students included the inability to find enjoyable books and books becoming more challenging as their associated reading level increased.

Students who did read for fun—and even some who read rarely—readily identified a wide variety of genres that interested them, with the most common ranging from romance and science fiction to manga and “nonfiction.” When deciding what to read, some students did not cite anyone specific as

Writing

Writing for fun was a less common activity than reading for fun among both high school and college students, with a majority of students in both groups reporting that they never wrote for pleasure. Several participants echoed the experience of a high school student who shared that they used to write for fun a lot in elementary school and middle school but stopped doing so as they got older, despite the fact that they “actually love to write.”¹⁰ For college students, a lack of time was the main driving factor

in no longer writing for fun. One college student acknowledged that reading and writing for fun were activities that they should probably do more often. When asked to elaborate, they spoke of how reading or writing “just keeps your mind working . . . it’s like a muscle you need to exercise . . . just important to do.”¹¹

Journaling was the most common form of writing outside work or school for both high school and college students. They described it as a way to process feelings, to record what was happening in their lives, or to write about something that had caught their attention. (“Like when I’m mad, does that count? Because I love to journal.”¹²) Most students, both high school and college, preferred typing over handwriting, although some high school students noted as a benefit that handwriting took them away from their phones for a period. One high school student said that, while in general they liked typing more than handwriting, when writing poetry they usually used a notebook, because “it feels like it comes to my head easier that way.”¹³

The Humanities and Exploring Academic Interests

When discussing the subjects they found most interesting and those they excelled in, both the high school and college students noted similar factors. Subject preferences largely remained consistent between high school and college, and the subjects that students enjoyed most consistently overlapped with the subjects they considered to be their best.

STEM-related subjects were by far the most popular among the high school students, with three-quarters naming one as their favorite subject and most students citing both a natural aptitude in the subject and an interest in the forms of problem-solving it prioritized. One student cited a preference for science subjects “because I don’t have to memorize as much. I can intuitively figure out what’s going on,” while another student indicated an interest “because of

the different branches that there are and the different ways of science that you can learn.”¹⁴ However, no clear alignment could be found between their best subject and the subject they planned to pursue in college, suggesting that other factors contributed to decisions about what area to study.

Conversely, when identifying their least favorite subjects, the students were more evenly split between STEM and the humanities. Their reasons varied from general difficulty with the content to finding the material uninteresting. A high school student who expressed a dislike for geometry said, “math hasn’t really been my strong suit, but I think the class itself is fun, but just the struggling part is really one thing.”¹⁵

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Reading and writing, however, were at the center of high school students’ thoughts and feelings about the humanities. Those high school students who reported English or history as their least favorite subject spoke often of not liking or struggling with aspects of reading and writing. Others mentioned a discomfort with the subjectivity of English and history, preferring the perceived clarity of STEM courses where answers are unambiguously right or wrong. On the other hand, those who enjoyed humanities subjects expressed an affinity for the storytelling aspect of those subjects and an appreciation for writing. One high school student remarked that “the past affects the future, so knowing the patterns is always really interesting.”¹⁶ For another student,

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English was a favorite because they not only enjoyed writing but also appreciated the essay composition skills their teacher was able to develop in them.¹⁷

Regardless of their favorite or least favorite subject, multiple high school students specifically called out the importance of reading, writing, and language skills, noting their utility not just for college but also for the “real world.” However, most high school students indicated that they did not intend to declare a humanities major in college, as they associated humanities degrees only with direct job applications; for example, a history degree implied a future career working as a historian.

Moving from high school to college did not appear to substantially affect which subjects students felt were their favorite or least favorite. Similar to the high school students, those in college reported disliking subjects because of the complexity of the material, memorization requirements, or even a perceived lack of practical use for the subject matter. Nearly every college student who called history their least favorite subject said they struggled with memorization, echoing what some of their peers cited as a reason for disliking science and underscoring the fact that some students have an affinity for one field over another. However, while high school students often spoke about the perceived benefits of humanistic skills, the college students often emphasized the perceived lack of usefulness of humanities subjects. One college student expressed a distaste for English and history because, as they said, “A lot of the things in those classes, I didn’t see how I will ever use in my life.”¹⁸

While most students shared that their favorite and least favorite subjects remained consistent from high school into college, when developing new interests or changing their opinions about previously disliked

subjects, the students overwhelmingly credited teachers and professors as the reason for the change.

The Role of Teachers in Developing Academic Interests

The critical role played by engaging and enthusiastic teachers recurred again and again in the interviews with college students as they looked back on their high school years and reflected on their time in college. When asked about what drew them to their favorite subject, one college student emphasized the role of engaging teaching: “Definitely the professor and how well I’m able to connect with the professor. Because I do enjoy learning, but if it feels more so like you’re being talked at rather than just we’re in a process of learning together, then it’s hard to really connect with the coursework.”¹⁹ Another college student shared that they found their economics class difficult but still found enjoyment in the subject because good professors “helped [me] enjoy it more than I would have with another professor that’s less excited.”²⁰

Particularly engaged college professors were also able to help students develop a new appreciation for subjects they reported disliking in high school. One student made this clear in describing a literature class of the Vietnam War that they were enrolled in: “I didn’t really like history as much in high school, but the professor made it super interesting. . . . I think that’s maybe changed my mind, and I really appreciate history a little bit more.”²¹ Most of the college students pointed to a particularly inspiring class that helped turn them on to a particular subject. Conversely, students also pointed out instances in which a poor experience with a teacher turned them off a subject. When asked about which classes they

most enjoyed, a college student shared, “I like all of my classes, except if, like, the professor sucks. I think I’ve only had, like, 3 classes that I didn’t like, and 2 of them was not because [of] the subject [but] because [of] the professor.”²²

The What and Why of College

Despite recent discussions in the media and new Trump administration policies emphasizing the return on investment for a college degree, this study found high school and college students view college as valuable for reasons beyond careers and earnings. Sociologist Ann Mullen noted that students are not driven solely by career concerns when thinking about what they want to study, and that came through in these interviews as well.²³ While all of the students in the study spoke of the importance of college for career preparation, most did not see that as its sole purpose. Instead, the vast majority of students viewed college as an opportunity for both personal and professional growth and thought of their futures not only in terms of work but also who they want to become as whole people.

While the most cited reason for attending college among the high schoolers was career preparation, many connected their future careers to the independence and opportunities they hoped a successful career would provide. For example, one high school student spoke of their interest in sports cars and looked forward to having the money to be able to engage with that interest.²⁴ Another high school student discussed working in environmental science as a way to travel, both around the United States and as far away as the Congo.²⁵ Yet another student also wanted to travel and experience different cultures; they stressed doing “something that I love or like I’m satisfied with but while also making money off of it.”²⁶ Though earning a good salary was a factor for high schoolers as they considered the high cost of attending college, when deciding whether to pursue college they also spoke of intellectual enrichment and personal growth.

A few ninth and tenth graders mentioned that increasing their knowledge would be the primary purpose of attending college. But the eleventh and twelfth graders thought of college as a great opportunity for personal growth. These students spoke about college as a chance to develop social connections and better understand the workings of the world. One said that, if given the opportunity to go to college, you should take it because “it’s your responsibility to be a good citizen of society and to be able to contribute.”²⁷

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Reasons for attending college remained largely the same for the college students, who generally associated not attending college with limited options in the future. Nearly all of the college students saw their degrees as offering more career choices, higher-paying roles, and structured pathways to professional success. One student who did not want to reduce their college studies to a set of career choices conceded, “I feel like since I’m paying so much for college, I don’t want to just leave here and get nothing out of it.”²⁸ Socioeconomic factors also influenced how college students viewed the decision to attend college. Nearly all of the first-generation students saw college as a stepping stone to a good career and a good salary, though only one college student spoke of a high salary as the primary reason for pursuing a future career.

The college students shared that various forms of personal development were important in their decision to attend college. Similar to their high school

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counterparts, college students were most excited about the potential for travel. One college student shared, “I want to live outside of the U.S. and I want to travel. One of the big things I want to do is travel more just to see what country I would fit in.”²⁹ Regardless of the field the students wanted to pursue or were already pursuing, preparation for a life that would allow for travel turned up as a consistent factor for attending college.

The college students also thought of college as an opportunity to gain independence and develop an identity separate from that of their family and the influence of their hometown. One college student shared that what they most wanted to get out of their college experience was “just finding out who I am and not having my parents influence, like, just kind of putting them to the side and really finding out who I am as a person.”³⁰ Other college students hoped college would help them grow socially, meet new people, and be exposed to people of different backgrounds. A college student made the point that, “if I were just looking for the degree, I could have done online college or community college. So, I think the people aspect is really important to me as well.”³¹ The chance to meet and learn from new people in college was also understood to be part of becoming a better citizen. Though they felt they were taking the necessary steps toward having a fruitful career, one college student shared that they were also “hoping to get lifelong friendships, a better outlook on the world, I guess the tools to be, I mean, I hate the term, but, like, a global citizen, just being more aware of what’s going on and understanding what you could do to help change for the better.”³² For the vast majority of both high school and college students, the benefits of attending college reached far beyond just potential careers.

Their ideas about the purpose and value of college were generally shaped by parents and peers. The high school focus group participants reported speaking with both family and friends when deciding whether to attend college, but they almost uniformly reported that they felt no pressure to follow a particular path. One lowerclassman said, “my parents have always been supportive of what I chose to do and never really told me to do something.”³³ Another echoed this sentiment, saying, “I’ve never been told ‘Don’t do this.’ I never really changed my idea of what I want to do growing up.”³⁴ The eleventh and twelfth graders reported feeling similarly. Most had at least one person in their life who followed the path they hoped to pursue, but similar to the ninth and tenth graders, they did not feel pushed to follow one path over another.

Thinking About College Majors

When asked about their intended college major, the majority of ninth and tenth graders said they planned to study a STEM-related subject, while the eleventh and twelfth graders were much more divided. High school students in general paid particular attention to the possible career paths associated with potential college majors—though without limiting themselves to financial considerations. For example, one upperclassman shared that, when considering what to study, they factored in potential for steady employment but also the possibility of using their career to better the world.³⁵

The lack of an obvious career path was a common reason for high schoolers not wanting to pursue a major in the humanities. One high school student expressed the belief that one could not do much beyond teaching with an English or history degree.³⁶ Other reasons for not wanting to pursue the humanities included a

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general lack of interest in the subject, with one high school upperclassman sharing that subjects like English and history just don't seem “fun” to them.³⁷

The college students interviewed—much like the high school students—frequently imagined direct career paths, like nursing and education, where specific majors are tied to the name of the profession. Some reported that they did not want to study a subject if they were unsure it would lead to a job.

While potential careers were on the minds of college students, they also considered their passions and the personal impact of an area of study. One college student, referencing a potential English and literature major, said of their goal in choosing a major, “I just want to have a better understanding of the things I enjoy, and about being alive.”³⁸ Speaking more generally, another college student said the decision of what to major in “definitely came down to what I was passionate about.”³⁹

Job security and potential careers were also commonly reported reasons for why college students second-guessed their chosen major. Some students looked at the fruitful careers of their peers and wondered whether they would be able to achieve the same in their current field of study. One student majoring in graphic design expressed concern about the role of generative AI in creating graphics. However, among college students with a humanities subject as at least one of their majors, none reported second-guessing their choice to major in the humanities.

In addition to looking at their peers and the changing world around them, college students sought specific advice from a variety of people in their lives on pursuing an area of study. Some students chose their

major on their own, but most sought advice when deciding what subject to pursue. Parents were the most frequently cited influence, followed by teachers, college advisors, and friends. Some parents were described as supportive of their children following the path they wanted (“‘Do what you want. It’s your college experience.’ They definitely made me more comfortable in choosing my major.”⁴⁰), while others actively discouraged their children from pursuing certain subjects (“Like, I love art, and I, like, want to take art classes, but my parents are paying for college, and my dad does not value art, and he thinks that making art in college is such a waste of time and money.”⁴¹). Among the interviewees in college, several noted that their coursework influenced which subjects they would like to pursue.

General Education Courses and Developing New Interests

College students were also asked about the role of general education courses in developing interest in new subjects. Experiences were mixed. Some students reported that they learned new things and were exposed to new areas of interest. Others said that general education courses had little impact on whether they continued to pursue those new interests.

Among those students who learned something new or found a new interest during their general education courses, inspiring professors and engaging course content were strong factors. One college student reported a very positive experience with a history course that led them to briefly consider history as a possible major. “It’d be the history of the Roman Empire, I think, or just Rome in general. That was really interesting because . . . do I actually

want to be a history major? It was so interesting to me. I think it did shape a role in my wonder for the world.”⁴² Another college student, who had declared an English major, noted that their interest in the subject developed after taking a required class, which led to their continuing on with that coursework.⁴³

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In contrast, many students said that general education courses were not a factor in developing their academic interests, citing frustration with the seeming lack of applicability of these courses or thinking of them as simply a requirement to be satisfied. One college student said, “There’s a sort of, like, a stigma with general education classes, it’s just like, you know, just do them to get them over with, or, you know, add them.”⁴⁴ Another referred to general education as “fun facts” but then noted that they did not “feel like the information I’m learning in the general ed courses [is] going to help me in whatever career field that I’m going to,” although they still acknowledged that the coursework helped to develop core competencies like critical thinking skills.⁴⁵

Articulating the Role and Value of the Humanities

Among the high school students, a few expressed both an interest and an aptitude for the humanities, but they were reluctant to major in the subject for reasons related to careers. In some cases this was due to parental pressure, but many of the high school students were quick to volunteer that they thought career options for humanities majors were quite limited. When separated from the issue of careers,

the students still tended to recognize the value of humanities skills and knowledge in their lives. But the lack of association with a career path appeared to inhibit students with an interest and aptitude in humanities subjects from considering the major.

The interviewed college students, most of whom were selected because they had at least one major in a humanities subject or a substantial interest in the field, were frequently quite articulate about what they perceived as the future value of the humanities degree. The interviews explored how they arrived at that conclusion.

Some of the students talked about the importance of pursuing a subject that would keep them engaged with their studies and help them finish college. As one student observed, “I know a lot of people like to look at the money and the financials for careers they can do afterwards, but for me, I was more so looking at what I really found joy in.”⁴⁶ A few of the students discussed taking on a second major with a professional focus to satisfy their career needs, while seeing their humanities major as a valuable complement. For instance, one student noted, “I’m planning on focusing on my business major for career opportunities and then bringing in the aspect that I can also speak Spanish.” Other students noted the inherent value of skills honed in a class such as English: “Reading, speaking, listening, and writing are just really important skills for any profession.”⁴⁷

The college students were also better able to articulate the larger social value of humanities studies than their high school counterparts. One college student noted the change in their own attitude, observing, “Before I went into college, a lot of it was related to just getting a career, but I think now that I’ve . . . taken a few humanities courses . . . I think becoming a better citizen . . . and becoming a more enriched person is, like, half of it now.”⁴⁸ Another student emphasized the essential capacities developed in humanities courses, observing that “as AI grows, and . . . fake things are just more and more prevalent, people are gonna start valuing real-world experiences a lot more.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

The responses from the college students with a demonstrated interest in the humanities—particularly when compared to the high school students—indicate that the arguments and encouragement from humanities faculty about the value of their degrees are not falling on deaf ears. Unfortunately, this research has not clearly demonstrated when or where those arguments might be best deployed to attract more students into humanities departments. Departments might want to consider focus groups with their own students to find out when and where they were moved to take up their majors and which cases moved them.

For today's high school and college students, decisions about whether to attend college and what to study once on campus are nuanced, influenced by their passions, experiences, and the lives they want to lead. Students are taking both personal and professional goals into account as they make these decisions, balancing concerns related to the high cost of education with the hope of becoming a better and more independent citizen of the world. They are also keen to follow paths that are interesting and fulfilling in addition to finding a career that provides financial stability. While students largely maintained their academic interests from high school into college, engaging professors were consistently cited as strong influences in introducing new interests or making a previously disliked subject newly engaging. Though return on investment and the employment prospects of humanities majors dominate popular discussions of higher education, the students themselves are thinking more broadly about their futures and engaging with their education as a means of multifaceted development.

Endnotes

1. High school student, April 15, 2025, focus group.
2. High school student, April 23, 2025, focus group. A similar observation was made in the April 29, 2025, focus group.
3. High school student, April 29, 2025, focus group.
4. High school student, April 15, 2025, focus group.
5. High school student, April 23, 2025, focus group.
6. College student interview no. 6.
7. College student interview no. 4.
8. College student interview no. 7. Also mentioned by a high school student in the April 29, 2025, focus group.
9. High school student, April 29, 2025, focus group.
10. High school student, April 23, 2025, focus group.
11. College student interview no. 16.
12. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
13. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
14. High school student, May 15, 2025, focus group; high school student, May 4, 2025, focus group.
15. High school student, April 23, 2025, focus group.
16. High school student, April 29, 2025, focus group.
17. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
18. College student interview no. 19.
19. College student interview no. 4.
20. College student interview no. 2.
21. College student interview no. 7.
22. College student interview no. 18.
23. Ann L. Mullen, "Gender, Social Background, and the Choice of College Major in a Liberal Arts Context," *Gender and Society* 28 (2) (2014): 289–312, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43669876>.

24. High school student, April 29, 2025, focus group.
25. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
26. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
27. High school student, May 26, 2025, focus group.
28. College student interview no. 10.
29. College student interview no. 4.
30. College student interview no. 23.
31. College student interview no. 2.
32. College student interview no. 3.
33. High school student, April 23, 2025, focus group.
34. High school student, April 23, 2025, focus group.
35. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
36. High school student, April 29, 2025, focus group.
37. High school student, May 6, 2025, focus group.
38. College student interview no. 24.
39. College student interview no. 2.
40. College student interview no. 10.
41. College student interview no. 18.
42. College student interview no. 7.
43. College student interview no. 8.
44. College student interview no. 20.
45. College student interview no. 12.
46. College student interview no. 2.
47. College student interview no. 5.
48. College student interview no. 25.
49. College student interview no. 15.

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