Humanities INDICATORS

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

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Ithaka S+R

The Academic Humanities Today: Opportunities & Challenges

Findings from Conversations with Department Chairs

Humanities chairs identified their departments' key strengths as providing a high level of care to students and a high level of faculty engagement and commitment to the institution.

A REPORT FROM THE HUMANITIES INDICATORS PROJECT
OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

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The American Academy's Humanities Indicators is a nationally recognized source of nonpartisan information on the state of the humanities, providing researchers and policymakers with better tools to answer basic questions about areas of concern in the field. Founded in 1780, the American Academy is both an honorary society that recognizes and celebrates the excellence of its members and an independent research center convening leaders from across disciplines, professions, and perspectives to address significant national and global challenges.

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Introduction

Since 2009, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators (HI) project has provided quantitative data about the status and outcomes of humanities degree programs in the United States, including through its Humanities Department Survey (HDS).[1] As part of the ongoing HI project, the Mellon Foundation funded a multiprong study to fill a gap in our knowledge related to the structure of undergraduate humanities programs and how that structure impacts students' choice of major. One prong of this study involved exploratory research into the concerns of humanities department chairs to ensure that the next round of the HDS covers all potential factors that impact students' choice of major. The Academy engaged Ithaka S+R to identify the most pressing concerns of humanities department chairs and explore how they are reconceiving their work in the current climate of retrenchment and technological change.

Ithaka S+R approached this engagement with the following research questions:

- How do chairs characterize the status of humanities departments within their institution and in the wider society?
- What factors affect faculty and staff turnover?
- How do chairs characterize their undergraduates, and how have they tried to increase enrollment? What is the impact of interdisciplinarity as a strategy for sustainability?
- How has artificial intelligence (AI) affected humanities teaching?

From April 22 to June 18, 2025, we conducted seven virtual focus groups with a cross-section of thirty humanities chairs. Participants were given the following information about how we would use their data:

> *We will not share information that identifies individuals or specific institutions with other individuals in your institution, or in public reporting, without your explicit permission. We will anonymize any public outputs.*

See the Appendix for demographic information on the departments represented. Two coders qualitatively analyzed the notes from these focus groups; findings across coders showed a high degree of consistency.

Overall, the chairs in this sample expressed a high level of concern about the status of the humanities. Approximately half had a strongly pessimistic outlook about the future of their department: "We are perceived as a necessary evil," said one. "Where's the respect for my expertise?" asked another. One-third of chairs expressed that their department was currently stable but that they were worried for its future. "We're seen as troublemakers," one stated; another characterized the humanities as "persecuted." Only six of the thirty chairs had an overall optimistic outlook about the status of their department at their institution, describing it as "a happy story" or "well supported."

Of thirty chairs, twenty-two pointed to societal views of the humanities and politics outside their institution as specific concerns. Almost two-thirds of chairs also expressed concerns about the attitudes of administrators within their institution toward the humanities. Chairs were less likely to express concerns about students' views of the humanities; a little over a third did so.

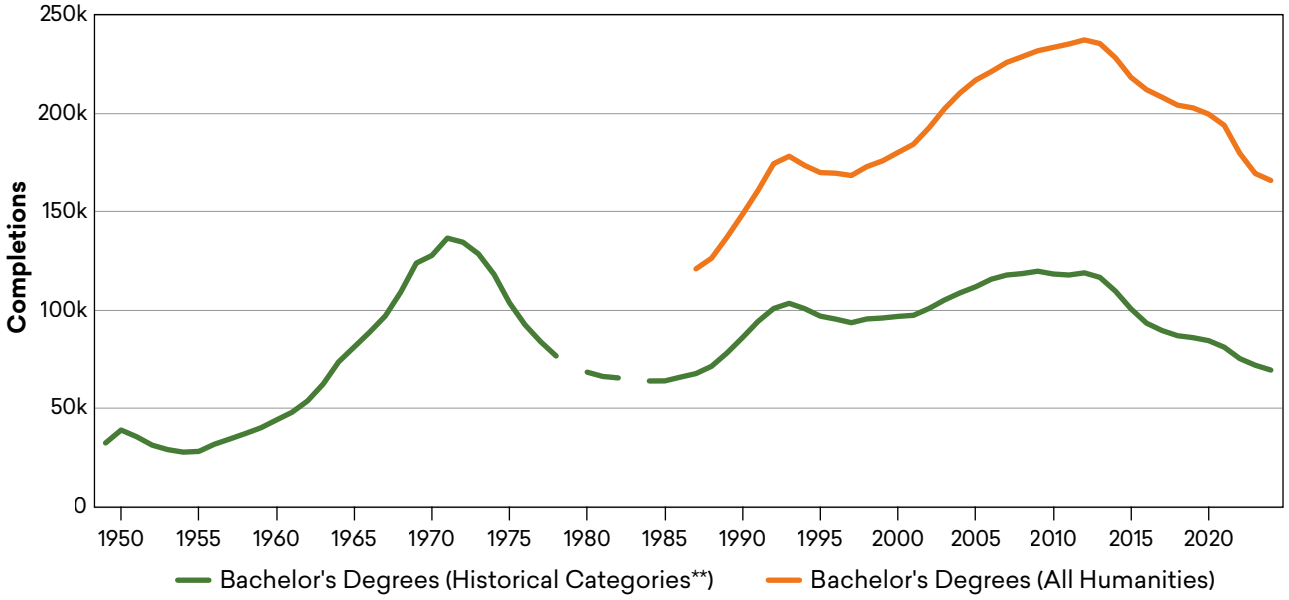
We did not specifically ask chairs about their institution's budget allocation practices and the impact these had on their department's overall outlook. Nonetheless, more than a third of chairs referenced cost and efficiency metrics, and roughly another third alluded to

1. Humanities Indicators of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Academic Humanities Today: Findings from the 2024 Department Survey* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025), https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/academic-humanities-today-findings-2024-department-survey.

evaluations based on the number of enrollments or majors. However, few chairs spoke explicitly about the relationship between declining enrollments and decision-making around allocations to humanities departments in the context of tight budgets at their institution and across higher education. That said, the downward spiral of declining enrollments, leading to smaller departmental budgets and fewer faculty, is a context we assume is in the background of many of the discussions with chairs we describe in this report.

Caring, personal relationships between faculty and students emerged as a primary strength of humanities departments, mentioned by two-thirds of chairs.

Trend in Bachelor's Degree Completions in the Humanities, 1949–2024



**Data on the entire range of humanities disciplines is available only back to 1987, but an extended historical perspective is available for several of the largest disciplines (classical studies, English language and literature, history, languages and literatures other than English, linguistics, and philosophy), which are labeled "Historical Categories" on the graph.

Source: Office of Education/U.S. Department of Education: Survey of Earned Degrees; Higher Education General Information System; and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Data analyzed and presented by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators.

Status of Humanities Departments within their Institutions

Relationships with Students

Caring, personal relationships between faculty and students emerged as a primary strength of humanities departments, mentioned by two-thirds of chairs. Humanities departments create a "welcoming" "community" where students feel at "home." As one chair at a private doctoral institution put it, "Students often report that we are the class where they are seen, we are the teachers who know their names." There is evidence that students share this view; a 2019 survey found that students were more likely to say that their arts and humanities professors "care[d] about me as a person."[2]

These personal relationships are primarily facilitated through small class sizes, although chairs also describe one-on-one mentoring, opportunities for community engagement, and student-oriented spaces and groups as contributing to the care they provide for students. The "humane scale of classes," as a chair at a public doctoral institution noted, is inseparable from a pedagogical approach that nurtures students' development as individuals: "Students say, 'This is the first class where I've ever gotten extensive comments on my paper.'" Chairs spoke about the tension between students' and faculty's preference for small classes and pressure from administrators to increase class sizes; as the chair at the private doctoral institution above elaborated, "Some of the things that we think make our classes successful, like our smaller class sizes, become a target for the administration. . . . They want to make classes bigger and take away what works for us."

Relationships with Administration

The eight chairs who were directly supervised by a supportive and understanding dean (or someone else in senior leadership) with a humanities background tended to have a more optimistic outlook about the state of the humanities at their institution. These chairs were more likely to describe being assessed with qualitative metrics such as external reviews, teaching evaluations, research productivity, or mission alignment, which they tended to feel were appropriate measures of their department's value.

On the other hand, unsupportive administrators tended to see humanities departments as "service departments" at best; at worst, administrators did not value humanities departments at all. Around a third of chairs described a situation where administrators do not understand their department's purpose. "There is very little understanding of what [our department] is or does," noted the chair of a languages other than English (LOTE) department. One classics department chair expressed that administrators would "probably happily get rid of us."

Departments in this position were more likely to be evaluated with metrics related to cost and efficiency, which chairs did not feel were good measures of their departments' value. Two metrics stood out as negatively impacting the humanities. In the few instances in which budget allocations were discussed, chairs called out funding models that apportion funding based on the number of majors, rather than course enrollments, as well as systems that rank faculty members according to the ratio of their salary to the number of students they teach. An English chair described this disconnect succinctly: "[our] human-scale, 'inefficient'

2. Steve Crabtree, "Student Support from Faculty, Mentors Vary by Major," Gallup, January 24, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/poll/246017/student-support-faculty-mentors-varies-major.aspx.

pedagogical practices [are in fact] incredibly valuable [and] efficient in all sorts of ways in creating real knowledge and self-understanding and civic value." But turning the potential value of these pedagogical practices into the real gains for students that this chair described required consistent support from administrators.

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Because the support of administrators has such a big impact on chairs' overall outlook, frequent turnover of upper administration complicates departments' efforts to plan for the future. As a chair at a public master's institution described, humanities chairs who had supportive administrators in the past must "reestablish who we are in the eyes of the new administration" each time staffing changes. On the other hand, administrative turnover offered a potential lifeline for chairs who had not previously had a supportive administrator. According to a chair at a public doctoral institution where the provost had recently changed, "We're hopeful [the new provost] will understand what we're about, although we're a bit skeptical because we haven't had a supportive provost."

Relationships with Other Units

Two-thirds of chairs also described how institutional programs and policies outside their direct control impacted their student pipeline. The most significant of these was whether the department offered a course that was required by the general education or core curriculum at their institution. Chairs viewed obtaining or maintaining a required course in the core curriculum as vital to "protecting" the department—and losing one as endangering it. Departments teaching a course that was one option among many to fulfill a core requirement were in a more tenuous position, but most were making it work. While chairs expressed appreciation for their long-term contingent faculty, they also remarked on the importance of having tenure-line faculty teach these general education courses without overwhelming their workloads so that they could form relationships with students that would endure as the student progressed through the major. Around a third of chairs also mentioned adversarial relationships with other campus administrative units, such as university marketing, admissions, advising, and career services, noting that these units recruited and funneled students away from the humanities, either deliberately or due to ignorance.

Fear that their department might not be able to maintain its independence was a common theme among chairs. Our sample included the chairs of three departments that had previously been combined or merged, plus four more chairs who anticipated an imminent merger. Chairs who worried about a potential merger tended to focus more on the negatives, seeing it as "death to the discipline." In contrast, the chairs of merged departments tended to focus on the benefits, emphasizing the value of merging "on their own terms" to maximize those benefits.

Faculty and Staff

Role of Faculty

The intellectual community fostered by faculty members was cited by chairs as another primary strength of humanities departments. Whether this community was more focused on innovation in research ("We are thought leaders in [our discipline]") or in teaching ("We're very progressive pedagogically") depended on the institution type, but in both cases chairs described the variety of activities their faculty are doing to support students, to promote cross-campus connection, and to advance their discipline. Several mentioned that their faculty are involved in institutional governance or student service initiatives, emphasizing their value as colleagues who provide a relational and programmatic lubricant within the institution.

Understandably, given the importance of departmental community, a primary metric used by chairs to assess their department's health is the ability to keep a consistent number of tenure-track faculty over time—that is, an ability to hire a replacement when a faculty member leaves and to retain the new hire long-term. Chairs frequently cited faculty age as a reason for faculty turnover (primarily through faculty retirements), and nearly half of chairs said they did not expect to see retiring tenure-line faculty members replaced or had already seen tenure lines cut when faculty left. An inability to replace a tenured faculty line was a major source of pessimism among chairs in our sample. One chair at a private baccalaureate institution was given less than five lines to replace double that number of retiring faculty, causing "an issue for continuity, an issue for mentorship." While about a third of chairs reported they were able to hire, a majority of these noted problems retaining new faculty members, often due to low salaries or unwelcoming working conditions (chairs occasionally noted that these faculty left for better jobs at other institutions). One chair at a private doctoral institution noted proudly, "We *have* been able to hire." In our sample of thirty, this chair was one of only three to report being able to hire and successfully retain faculty.

The combination of, on the one hand, departments that provide a high level of care to students and a high level of service to the institution and, on the other hand, a diminishing number of faculty to do that work contributes to another major challenge noted by many chairs: faculty "exhaustion" and "burnout." "We are extraordinarily underresourced," explained one; with "a shoestring budget," noted another. This leads faculty to feel "drained" due to "increasing demands." One chair explained that their job is to say "no" when administrators ask for more service than they are able to provide, but this puts their department in a difficult position when they need something.

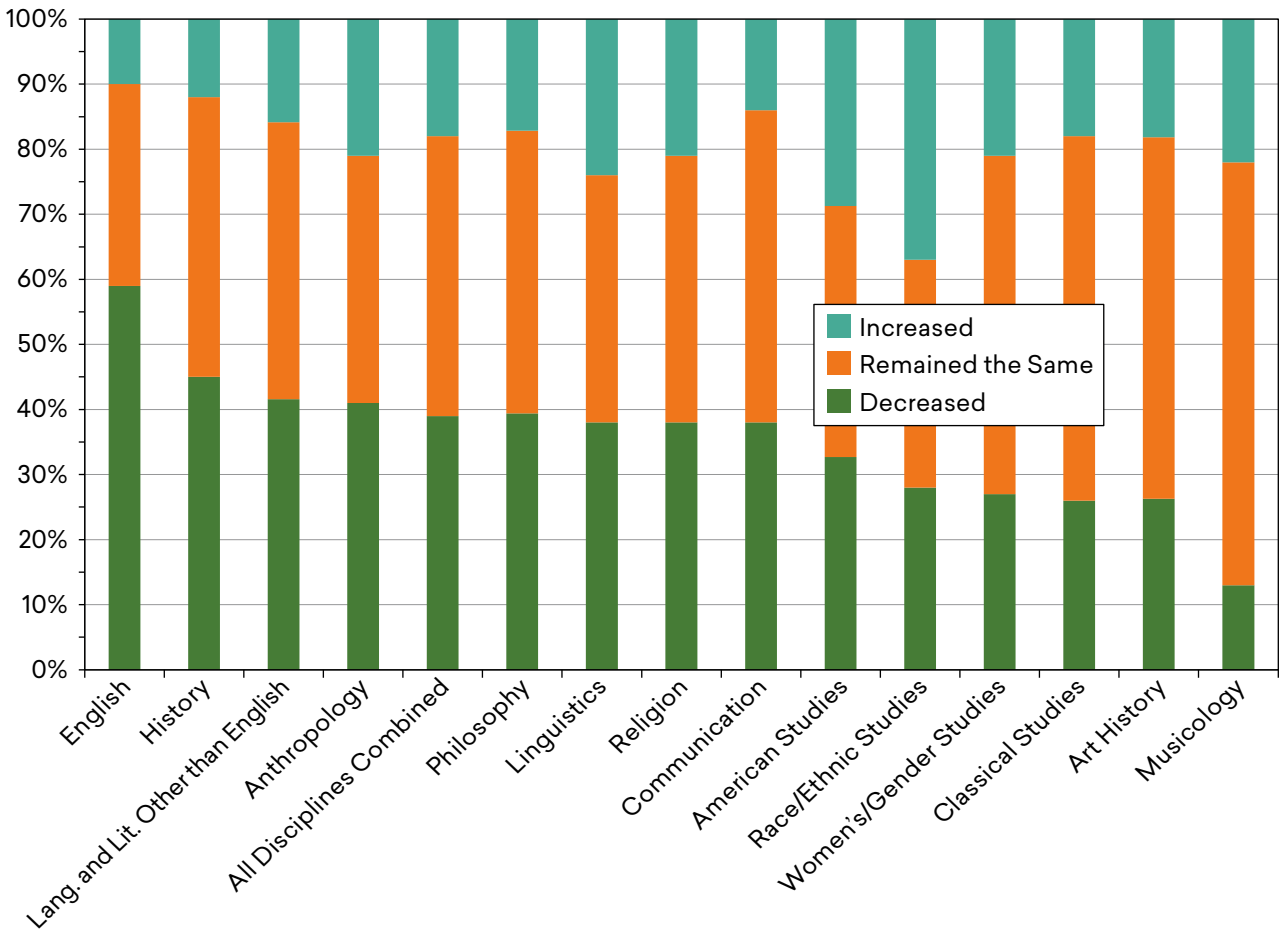
The aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the adjustment to online teaching are also sources of faculty fatigue. A few chairs felt faculty were less physically present on campus as a result. One chair at a large private research university remarked, "my building feels empty all the time. . . . People go there to teach their classes and then they leave campus." A chair at a small private college noted that the spring 2025 semester was "the first time since COVID" that they have "had significant student and faculty turnout for those 6 pm events." In addition, more than a third of chairs reported increased student stress, particularly around the sustained attention needed for reading, and some linked it to the "lingering" pandemic as well: "We are seeing a huge increase in student anxiety and depression. It could be COVID-related or not. Students are so different from five years ago in terms of how they react." Faculty dealing with their own fatigue may lack the tools to assist these overwhelmed students.

Role of Staff

Chairs were not just concerned about retaining and replacing faculty. About a third of chairs expressed

similar concerns related to departmental staff. Chairs reported frequent staff turnover because staff are "underpaid" and because the institutional push for efficiency creates undesirable working conditions. As one chair at a public doctoral institution noted, to "avoid the idea of one office staff person per department, [which] the university sees as wasteful," institutions use the "secretarial pool idea—the idea that one person will do one task (for example, travel requests) for all departments, and this will be their only job." Another chair at a public doctoral institution elaborated, "Then they hire this [staff person] who does this one thing all the time for everyone—and they can't keep this staff person." Chairs also described how the burden of staff labor falls on faculty when staff leave and are not replaced. According to a chair at a public doctoral institution who shares department staff across four units, "Things fall through the cracks, and faculty take on responsibilities that the staff can't handle. When staff leave, faculty have to fill in the gaps." This chair hoped that an upcoming staff reorganization would "[delineate] responsibilities more clearly [and allow] work that faculty have taken on to be taken on by staff." Though frequent staff turnover and adversarial relationships with advising staff were mentioned in the interviews, none of the chairs mentioned that frequent turnover of advising staff may also have an impact on departments' ability to develop relationships with advisors who might direct students to their department.

Share of Department Chairs Reporting a Change in the Number of Tenure-Line Faculty from Fall 2020 to Fall 2023, by Discipline



Source: Humanities Indicators of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Academic Humanities Today: Findings from the 2024 Department Survey* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025), 7.

Students: Enrollment and Majors

Enrollment in Humanities Courses

Humanities chairs saw serving students as central to their departments' mission, and many described their faculty as passionate about teaching and mentoring. That said, getting students to enroll in their departments' courses was often a challenge. Offering courses that count toward general education or other institutional requirements (e.g., language and writing-intensive courses) was the most common strategy that humanities chairs mentioned as helping to keep their enrollment numbers up.

While chairs saw inclusion in general education or other requirements as important lifelines for their departments, they also pointed out the attendant pitfalls. First, such requirements can change—forcing departments to pivot. For instance, one chair explained that, when philosophy was taken out of core undergraduate requirements, their department had to start offering courses that contributed to other core programs, such as the honors program. Other chairs also mentioned contributing to honors or other interdisciplinary programs as one of the ways they keep enrollment up.

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Another common issue was that many chairs felt their administration—and even some students—saw their department as primarily existing to serve general education or other requirements. In one focus group, participants emphasized the idea of their department being "instrumentalized" to perform this service. As one English chair from this group commented, "We're perceived as instrumentalized. We just teach you how to write a sentence—that isn't what we went to grad school for." A philosophy chair in the same group emphasized that the "intrinsic" value of their discipline might be overlooked due to this kind of "instrumentalization." "I do think philosophy is instrumentally valuable," they explained. "For example, in the context of disability studies for education, nursing, or sociology students. But philosophy is not only valuable in this way; all learning has some degree of intrinsic value."

The Major Selection Process

Most students enrolled in courses offered by the focus-group chairs' departments are nonmajors. Convincing these students to become majors is a significant hurdle. When we asked chairs about the biggest challenge their department was facing, one history chair summed up the sentiments of many: "When you have a student in a class, how do you turn them into a major?"

The perception that humanities degrees severely limit your employment options as a graduate—especially if you aspire to have a high-paying job—was by far the dominant reason that chairs felt today's students are gravitating away from the humanities. They saw this discourse around the humanities as inextricably linked to the wider shift in focus toward career preparation at U.S. higher education institutions. As one English chair from an institution serving mostly first-generation students explained, "careers the students are familiar with are 'professions'—law, nursing, business. So they don't understand what to do with an English major except be a teacher." Chairs frequently

described their institutions and higher education generally as increasingly "transactional" or "focused on professionalization," ideas that for many of them clash with the role of the humanities. Another chair commented, "the mission of universities has shifted toward being vocational schools, and this has been hard for the humanities, who are focused on things like ethics, human history, and its lessons."

Parents were the most frequently cited source for students' ideas that a humanities degree will not prepare them to get a "good" job: around one-third of chairs described parents as driving antihumanities sentiments. Parents, more so than students, see students' education as an investment in their future career and want a sure bet. Some chairs were understanding of this position even if they disagreed with it, acknowledging that these parents may not have gone to college themselves and may not be familiar with the types of jobs you can get with a college degree. One English department chair, for instance, described many of their students as arriving in college "curious" about English, "but their parents discourage them. They eventually make their way over to the English major later, once they are a little more removed from family pressure." Advisors and admissions offices were also mentioned as promoting dominant discourses about the humanities and career readiness.

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While interviewees often emphasized that first-generation students are especially concerned by employability upon graduation, they also indicated that the focus on career readiness is widespread among students across institution types. Chairs from large research institutions, medium-size regional schools, and small, private baccalaureate colleges reported that career readiness was a concern for their students. The sole exception was one chair at a small liberal arts college who felt most students choosing to attend their institution "had already rejected the preprofessionalism idea." However, chairs from other small liberal arts colleges described their students' concerns about their career trajectories in similar terms to the chairs from other types of institutions. For instance, one chair at a small liberal arts college described their students as "scared to explore intellectual interests if it won't help them with their future careers." Another chair at a similar institution described their students as "very professionalized" and "taking classes that are 'better' for their career and future."

Strategies for Boosting Enrollment and Majors

Diversification Initiatives

When discussing methods for increasing the number of majors (and enrolled students) in their departments, chairs frequently acknowledged the need to do better outreach and marketing for the humanities. However, few chairs were able to describe successful marketing or outreach campaigns.

Instead, the strategies that chairs employ could be described as "show, don't tell" approaches to communicating the value of the humanities. For students who must prioritize practical career-related concerns, simply telling them that the humanities lead to viable career paths is not enough. Chairs succeed when they demonstrate the value of the humanities to students in the here and now, while they are still students, in a way that breaks down the dividing line between the ivory tower and the real world.

The primary "show, don't tell" approach chairs described for recruiting students was diversifying their faculty and course offerings to better match their student population. Diverse faculty and course offerings show—rather than tell—students that they are welcome in the department. These diversification initiatives teach students that their cultural and intellectual traditions are valuable areas of inquiry and

in some cases even allow them to observe a potential career path. For instance, a few chairs—from English, ethnic studies, and gender studies departments—noted that their students appreciated courses that addressed social and political issues they cared about. Additionally, a diverse faculty and student body is better able to provide mentorship and coaching to students new to the discipline; one chair described a successful program founded by a former colleague that was "dedicated to supporting the mentoring of first-generation students."

Chairs who had implemented these types of diversifying initiatives saw them as moderately to highly successful, but several admitted they still had a long way to go. For example, two philosophy chairs spoke of the enduring legacy of their discipline being white and male, and a gender studies chair said they were still working on getting more men and students of color into their classes—but others had at least seen some signs of success.

Unfortunately, the decline in the number of faculty in their departments, especially the decline of tenure lines, is a significant hurdle to such initiatives. Diversifying the faculty and course offerings is challenging when the department does not have many faculty in the first place. One English chair thought their department was actually "getting whiter over time even if institutions supposedly have a priority for that to not be the case"; namely, "because we've lost so many lines and are not able to replace them." Having fewer faculty means fewer courses are offered, leading departments to serve fewer students, which is an overall negative in the effort to attract potential majors. Additionally, though this was not mentioned in the focus groups, recent federal government actions and guidance may discourage institutions from pursuing formal diversification initiatives. Future efforts to diversify faculty will likely be further curtailed.

Other "Show, Don't Tell" Strategies: Community Engagement and Financial Incentives

Around half of chairs described how creating an innovative curriculum that highlights community engagement and other high-impact practices helps boost enrollment and major numbers. In this way, students are able to observe (versus being "told") the "immediate material relevance" of the humanities for themselves in their local (on- and off-campus) communities. As an example, one chair described their department partnering with disadvantaged people in their community on a literary project. This hands-on experience implementing what students were learning in class demonstrated the practical value of their knowledge more than a marketing campaign could. Encouraging students to use their humanities skills in the community also demonstrates respect for students' need for career security. Both gender studies chairs we spoke to noted an "uptick in interest" and "thriving" linked to their engaged curriculum. Chairs who mentioned departmental initiatives around high-impact practices had a more optimistic outlook overall than those who did not.

Having fewer faculty means fewer courses are offered, leading departments to serve fewer students, which is an overall negative in the effort to attract potential majors.

Additionally, by providing financial incentives to students, institutions can demonstrate the financial viability of humanities disciplines in the here and now. The three departments in this sample that provided financial incentives to students (through paid internships, paid summer programs, and comprehensive need-based aid) were able to show parity with disciplines in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and demonstrate respect for students' practical needs rather than expecting them to make financial sacrifices to study the humanities. As one chair put it, these funds show "students the kind of work they could be doing." One chair described their financial incentive program as "very successful." Unfortunately, the "defunding of the NEH and the NEA" (the National Endowment for the Humanities and the

National Endowment for the Arts) makes establishing such programs even more difficult for most institutions.

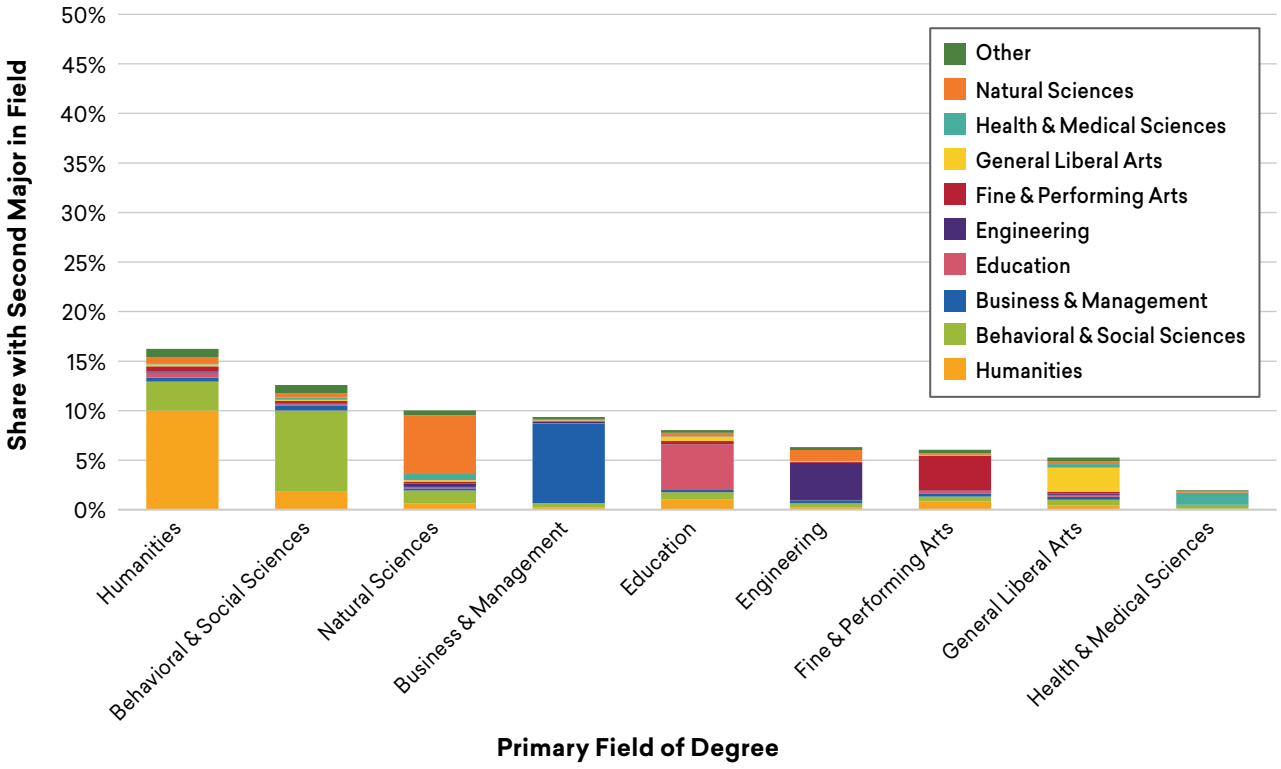
Engaging Double Majors

Most students majoring in the humanities opt for double majors, according to chairs, as a way to balance a humanities major with a more "career-oriented" one. Therefore, making the department's major easier to include in a double major is also an important consideration when trying to attract majors. Two chairs described making their curricula more "flexible" with "modified requirements" so that courses from other disciplines could be included.

That said, double majors were not a solution for all institutions. One chair at a research university explained that students at their institution declare primary then additional majors, but only the primary majors count for data on the number of majors in their department and budget distributions. The major declared as primary tends to be the more "career relevant" one. Because additional majors do not hold the same weight in the administration's reporting, this chair felt the system disadvantaged their department. Hearing this, another participant in the group from a small baccalaureate institution remarked, "that system would ruin us."

Among the strategies for interdisciplinarity that chairs had found to be the most successful were cross-listing courses and participating in joint or dual major programs.

"Second" Major at Graduation, by Primary/"First" Major (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2024)



Source: National Student Clearinghouse, special data runs for the Humanities Indicators.

Interdisciplinarity

Types of Interdisciplinarity

The majority of chairs saw their departments as engaged with interdisciplinary work. Of the thirty department chairs in our sample, twenty-three described their department as interdisciplinary or involved in interdisciplinarity at the institution in some way. Therefore, interdisciplinarity was common across all disciplines, with gender and ethnic studies chairs being most likely to state that their department was interdisciplinary by definition and from the moment of its conception.

The types of interdisciplinarity described by chairs varied significantly, however. About half of the examples fell into the category of interdisciplinarity *internal* to the department. Chairs of these departments usually characterized them as "already" or "inherently" interdisciplinary. The most commonly cited examples of internal interdisciplinarity were: 1) courses taught within the department that the chair described as "interdisciplinary"; and 2) the department offering a variety of distinct programs or certificates.

The other half of the examples of interdisciplinarity were interdisciplinarity *external* to the department; that is, where interdisciplinarity involved engagement with other departments or units. The most common form was the cross-listed course, which eight chairs highlighted as an example of how their department was interdisciplinary. Other strategies mentioned include participating in some kind of interdisciplinary program or center at the institution, having faculty who hold dual appointments, being involved with joint or dual majors across departments, offering courses that count toward interdisciplinary minors, and incorporating community engagement into the curriculum. A few chairs also cited team teaching—with either inter- or intradepartmental teams of instructors—as an important form of interdisciplinarity for their department.

Successes in Interdisciplinary Initiatives

When asked whether these interdisciplinary initiatives are boosting the number of students enrolled in the courses and the number of majors in their department, chairs in our sample were divided. Nine thought that their interdisciplinary endeavors were improving their student recruiting, while eight were unclear or expressed mixed feelings. Three fell in a third category, expressing exclusively negative opinions about the success of interdisciplinarity for their department. The overall picture suggests that interdisciplinarity may be somewhat effective in helping humanities departments recruit students. However, when addressing this issue, chairs often mixed the distinct matters of recruiting students *into their department's classes* and recruiting them *into the major*. Success for the former goal was higher than for the latter.

Among the strategies for interdisciplinarity that chairs had found to be the most successful were cross-listing courses and participating in joint or dual major programs. This is unsurprising: diversifying course offerings is already an important enrollment-boosting strategy, and creating more interdisciplinary and cross-listed courses goes hand in hand with diversification initiatives. Additionally, joint majors and similar programs make it easier for students to include a humanities major alongside another major—another important strategy for increasing the overall number of humanities majors. These programmatic types of interdisciplinarity are also likely to be the most successful because they are built into student requirements, require a minimal extra time commitment from already overwhelmed faculty, and encounter minimal administrative hurdles.

In some cases, interdisciplinary initiatives are geared toward an institution's strengths; for example,

one chair of a LOTE department at a STEM-focused institution had participated in interdisciplinary efforts linking the humanities with these fields. However, interdisciplinarity efforts did not necessarily need to include STEM to be successful. A few chairs cited joint majors between the humanities and social sciences, such as a history/political science joint major. One chair of a LOTE department noted that, while major numbers were declining for single language majors like French, their institution had supported the creation of multilanguage majors and minors, which had helped to attract students.

Challenges for Interdisciplinary Initiatives

About half of the chairs in our sample had mixed opinions or seemed unsure regarding interdisciplinarity. These conversations helped reveal the significant challenges departments are facing in recruiting students through interdisciplinarity, even if they have had limited successes. Administrative and structural barriers at the institution were the primary hurdle for most. One chair of a philosophy department summed up the comments of many when they remarked, "interdisciplinarity has been a buzzword for a long time. There have been many efforts to introduce such programs, then they die on the vine. . . . Typically, they fall prey to the increased costs of doing anything that involves more moving parts. There are so many entrenched institutional disincentives to doing interdisciplinarity right."

These administrative/structural barriers emerge in a variety of ways. For example, a few chairs in one focus group agreed that their institutions did not sufficiently support team teaching. Administrators assumed that team teaching would increase enrollment in such classes by a factor equal to the number of faculty on the team, as well as that each team member's teaching load would decrease, neither of which turns out to be the case. A group of chairs also pointed out that general education and other majors' requirements could be a roadblock to students enrolling in interdisciplinary courses. One of these individuals noted their university had recently decreased the number of general education requirements at the request of science departments, which subsequently increased requirements within their own majors, keeping those students occupied within their departments. At some institutions, silos or rivalries among departments who want to keep students to themselves are a barrier to interdisciplinary cooperation.

Additionally, interdisciplinarity is more appealing to students and administrators when it appears to be relevant for students' career preparation. Two chairs, both from public regional institutions, highlighted this issue, noting the need for "workforce justification" to convince both the administration and students to engage in interdisciplinary initiatives.

Interdisciplinarity was most successful when institutional/administrative and faculty/department-level motivations were aligned. Chairs often described interdisciplinary initiatives as emerging from their departments thanks to faculty interest and commitment; just as often, chairs expressed frustration that their university's administrative policies or priorities did not support these initiatives. On the flip side, a few chairs mentioned that institutional imposition of interdisciplinary initiatives misaligned with departmental interests was not appreciated.

Finally, our discussions revealed that, while interdisciplinary courses help keep up departmental enrollment numbers, they have not always had the desired level of success in recruiting majors. For instance, one chair described teaching an interdisciplinary course that appeals to STEM majors. While the course gets high enrollment numbers, only "a handful" of its students go on to take other humanities courses. This chair is therefore "not convinced that these interdisciplinary courses are the gateway courses we hope they will be." Along similar lines, another chair said that, on a one to ten scale, they would give interdisciplinary courses a five for their success in attracting majors. They highlighted the example of "grouchy seniors" who procrastinate taking a required humanities course until the last minute, at which point it is too late to recruit them.

External Perceptions of the Humanities and Higher Education

One of the chairs' chief concerns lay outside the academy, in society's negative perceptions of the humanities and of higher education as a whole.

Though we asked chairs to limit their discussion of political concerns to those that directly impacted their department, two-thirds of chairs brought up the topic. Around a third of chairs—particularly those leading ethnic studies, gender studies, history, and LOTE departments (which, as one chair noted, contain a large percentage of international faculty)—mentioned that their departments had been directly impacted by legislative changes at the state or federal level. These changes ranged from funding allocations that disadvantaged the humanities to outright bans on their disciplines. An additional third of chairs did not mention specific legislation but raised concerns about the overall political climate, its impact on undocumented students, and the loss of the federal grant system. Because they have previously received death threats about programs they have sponsored, one chair of a combined department no longer advertises their activities in the community.

Chairs felt that "declining student interest in humanities may be in fact due to the politicalization of the humanities fields so that students are less likely to see them as valuable." They saw the humanities and the idea of a "liberal arts" education as having become particularly polarized. Indeed, four chairs reported that their institutions, despite having "a strong reputation as a liberal arts institution," were actively distancing themselves from this mission due to negative perceptions of the liberal arts. One English department chair echoed the sentiments of many when they explained that the humanities "shouldn't be seen as partisan. . . . It's something that should not be pigeonholed in one political camp."

These perceptions of the humanities and liberal arts are having a material impact on humanities departments' efforts to enroll students. This issue was especially poignant for the ethnic studies chairs we spoke with. One stated that majors and enrollment numbers in their department have been "diminishing" due to "hostility toward general academic work," "anti-intellectualism," "hostility toward the populations we serve," and "anti-woke sentiment." Another ethnic studies chair explained that "the political situation has trickled down to students, [who are asking] 'should I even take these classes in Black or Latino studies?'" The same chair added, "I used to feel very supported. . . . But as the political arena has shifted, it is incredible how weak the administration has been in defending our interests."

For chairs, these concerns about politicized perceptions of the humanities and liberal arts are inseparable from higher education's "vocational" turn. The prioritization of career readiness and the perception that a humanities degree does not suit that agenda are the main reasons chairs feel they are struggling to attract majors. Beyond the context of recruiting students, chairs also discussed higher education's turn toward professionalization as part of the wider sociopolitical landscape that is having detrimental impacts on the humanities.

For the chairs we spoke to, the current political climate and the resulting perceptions of higher education and the humanities are problems that cannot be ignored. As one gender studies chair argued, these "broader public perceptions" matter because "the university is not divorced from the rest of the town." They explained, "Now is a good time to have a PR campaign for the humanities: what we do, why it matters . . . how it impacts public life. This is an important task for attracting students, getting funding, but also informing the broader public who can't afford to go to university, to have them understand the broader impact of the humanities."

Marketing

Society's perceptions of higher education filter into the academy as well. One major theme that emerged from the focus groups is that humanities chairs do not feel understood. Half of the chairs we spoke with expressed this sentiment using remarkably consistent language with respect to both students (who "don't understand what we [the philosophy department] do") and administrators (whose "perception of the [gender studies] department is 'What do you even do there?'"). As a history chair explained, "It's a constant pedagogical initiative from the department to explain to administrators what we do."

Multiple chairs articulated the career-relevant skills that students learn through a humanities education, though we did not ask them to do so. For example, according to an English chair, "Humanities are important for understanding the world, being able to analyze and write and evaluate and make decisions. There is personal and intellectual growth through reading and looking at evidence, skills of understanding and analysis, as well as knowledge of history, cultures, points of view besides your own. Humanities are crucial to taking an informed approach to issues of the day, important no matter which career you land in." However, chairs' ability to describe their activities seemed to be fundamentally disconnected from administrators' and students' ability to *understand* these descriptions. As a classics chair put it, "Humanities are relentlessly justifying themselves. We do a great job of articulating our value, but [the administration] needs to actually listen."

This communication disconnect is likely related to an incompatibility in disciplinary approaches. Humanists focus on intrinsic human value. As an English chair put it, they attract students "whose own need to produce knowledge eclipses their economic pressures to be capitalists." By contrast, many stakeholders (including some administrators, students, and members of the public) view learning as a commodity and people as products. As an ethnic studies chair explained, "the neoliberal powers that be are insisting that we become dehumanized cogs in the wheel [and attend to] market forces [like] 'demand.'" The humanist worldview is at odds with the prevailing attitude among the public, creating a communication gap that humanists are unable to bridge alone.

Several chairs mentioned the need for a marketing campaign that would communicate the value proposition of the humanities within and beyond their institutions and help them connect with prospective students who might be receptive to that message. However, chairs often felt that they themselves were not able or well-suited to carry out such a campaign. In some cases, chairs thought they and their faculty were too overloaded with day-to-day work to take on marketing tasks and that those tasks should be the responsibility of other institutional units like admissions. In other cases, chairs felt that their articulations of the humanities' value were failing to sink in. As a LOTE chair explained, "We are not good marketers in our industry. We need to get the message across better about the value of humanities. But I'm having trouble figuring out what it is I need to say to get the message across." Another chair described tentative steps toward a cross-departmental humanities marketing campaign targeting students that would be rolled out at a spring recruitment event at their institution: "We just finalized the mission statement . . . we're going to put up posters, [give out] T-shirts [promoting] the humanities [as a whole], not just English or history." Chairs offered less evidence, however, that they had established how to enact successful marketing campaigns directed at administrators or the general public, even if they thought such efforts were necessary.

A promotional billboard in the Phoenix area, paid for by the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona. Photo courtesy of the University of Arizona.

Artificial Intelligence

The introduction of generative AI tools sent shock waves through higher education after OpenAI's ChatGPT was commercially released at the end of 2022. We asked chairs for their opinions on how this new technology is impacting teaching and learning in the humanities. (Although *AI* and *artificial intelligence* are general terms that can refer to many types of AI technologies, in the context of our focus groups the chairs unambiguously referred to recent generative AI tools when they spoke about AI.)

The humanities chairs in our sample described AI as causing seismic changes in the classroom. For the most part, they were pessimistic about the potential effects. Half of the chairs we spoke to had overall negative opinions of AI's impact on teaching and learning in the humanities, often emphasizing feelings of being overwhelmed, demoralized, and frustrated. Only three chairs expressed a mainly positive outlook. The rest had vague, mixed, or unclear opinions on AI. As department chairs, many of the individuals we spoke to were likely mid- or late-career. This may have had an impact on their tendency to hold negative views of AI. As one English chair noted, junior faculty in their department are innovating with AI in the classroom, while senior faculty are banning it. That said, our conversations still indicated that feeling pessimistic—or, at least, feeling overwhelmed and confused—in the face of AI is widespread in the humanities.

Challenges Related to AI

Unsurprisingly, student use of AI tools was a main concern for humanities chairs. One classics chair described themself as "at my wit's end," as they regularly receive papers written by AI. Though many chairs receive what they suspect are completely or partially AI-generated written assignments from their students, proving their suspicions is difficult, and chairs feel they are getting insufficient guidance from their institutions in this struggle. The aforementioned classics chair described the complicated and time-consuming process they went through when they reported an AI-generated essay as plagiarism at their institution. As one LOTE department chair put it, "cheating has always been an issue, and proving it has always been an issue. But now cheating has gotten easier." A chair of a gender studies department underlined how "frustrating" it is for faculty trying to figure out whether written assignments were generated by AI. They added that this is "eroding trust between students and faculty," since "accusing students of using AI can cause problems in the student-teacher relationship."

About one-third of the chairs we spoke to described specific ways they have adapted their pedagogy due to AI. The most common solution is returning to in-class writing assessments to eliminate plagiarism concerns. Others are integrating more group work or personal writing assignments into their courses. Chairs were concerned about the fundamental ways AI would change student learning, especially of core humanities skills like critical thinking or deep reading. In a few cases, chairs said their faculty were beginning to find ways for students to critically engage with AI. These chairs mentioned examples of exercises where students use AI for a task, then evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the AI tool's output, with the objective of giving students a better critical understanding of the technology.

Chairs who had negative or mixed opinions about AI's impact on the humanities did not necessarily see AI technology itself as an inherent evil. The primary source of frustration for many was how their institutions have handled AI's integration into education. Because the technology has emerged so quickly and with such massive impacts, instructors feel unable to keep up, and chairs describe their institutions as overwhelmed, underprepared, and thus unable to offer the necessary degree of support to instructors. As one English department chair explained, "It's very rapid. Universities are underresourced to deal with it. We

have panels and workshops on AI and teaching. The people who present at those are well-intentioned, but they feel a day late and a dollar short." For other chairs, the question was less about whether training was being offered; they simply did not have the time to engage. As one chair put it, "How can you possibly keep up with this AI issue with a four/four teaching load?"

Critical analysis of AI's impact on education and society is important to humanities chairs. In their own classes, they prioritize this type of discussion and try to set standards for appropriate and inappropriate uses of the technology. However, they feel this runs counter to their administrations, which are encouraging AI use among faculty and students. As one history chair explained, the "push" at their institution to adopt AI without enough "critical discussion" about "everything that goes into it, whether it be environmental or labor," was problematic. They speculated that the institution was driven by a "fear of missing out" and a desire to be "cutting edge." Another chair, from a philosophy department, said they "loved the idea of embracing AI" but had significant concerns because "we need to ask important ethical questions about whether using AI is justifiable." This same chair emphasized the magnitude of the issue and the need for continued reflection and training: "We feel the world might be very different, and we don't know what skills students will need in the future. I would love training on how to proceed. No one knows where the world is going with this and what the changing needs of pedagogy will be."

Potential Positives Related to AI and the Role of the Humanities

The few chairs who had a positive outlook on AI were optimistic that the humanities would adapt to the challenge and that it could even result in positive pedagogical outcomes. One English department chair described this as an "exciting pedagogical moment" to rethink what students should learn, mentioning moving away from the five-paragraph essay toward "more reflective" types of writing. A philosophy chair stated that, although they "hate AI" and "wish it could go away," they had found ChatGPT to be helpful for designing more interesting group activities for their course. One ethnic studies chair reported finding AI useful for students who arrive at their institution from underresourced backgrounds and are "behind in their skills." This chair employs AI tools with these students to help "fill in the gaps for writing and creative products that I as an instructor do not have time to support." As they explained, "while students coming from more resourced schools are moving forward in the course, minority students are still struggling with the basics. AI helps them get past this initial struggle and helps put them on par with students coming from more resourced [school] systems." Plus, they added, "I don't think that feeling demoralized about AI helps. It's here and it is here to stay. The genie is out of the bottle. We can only work with it and find ways to use it to our advantage as instructors and harness its power available to other sectors of our society to help students who need help." However, this was a minority view among the chairs we spoke with.

The humanities chairs in our sample described AI as causing seismic changes in the classroom. For the most part, they were pessimistic about the potential effects.

Chairs expressed a continued belief in the importance of the humanities and the skills it teaches in the age of AI. A few chairs mentioned the importance of teaching students to critically evaluate AI's outputs with humanities-based skills. Others argued that the humanities will be crucial in helping us think about AI's wider impacts on higher education and society—and a few even mentioned courses or programs already being developed at their institutions with these aims. For example, one chair described an interdisciplinary program in development that intends to get students thinking more deeply about the ethical and social justice implications of AI. A philosophy chair summed up the thoughts of many on the importance of the humanities in the current situation, describing AI's emergence as "a wake-up call for humanities."

Conclusion

The focus groups with thirty humanities department chairs point to four main findings.

1. Humanities chairs feel helpless in the face of societal and administrative forces beyond their control.

Much of humanities chairs' pessimism is linked to larger trends in society that impact higher education, overwhelming chairs' individual efforts. These forces include falling enrollments and slashed budgets; politicization of humanities disciplines; a shift toward professional and vocational focus in higher education; and a concomitant perception that a humanities degree does not provide a smooth pathway to a lucrative job.

Humanities chairs' pessimism is also linked to a lack of control over their immediate working conditions. The degree of administrative support they receive often depends on the specific individuals in senior leadership positions and their opinions toward the humanities, as well as the high rate of administrative turnover, which makes long-term planning difficult. In this way the chairs' concerns resemble those of middle managers across professions.

2. Departmental strengths and success strategies are often undermined by a lack of administrative support.

Humanities chairs identified their departments' key strengths as providing a high level of care to students and a high level of faculty engagement and commitment to the institution. However, because of these strengths, administrators' responses to societal trends—such as cutting tenure lines, reducing staff numbers, and discouraging small class sizes—impact humanities departments first and worst, leading to faculty burnout. As institutional and parental pressures funnel students away from the humanities, humanities departments rely heavily on general education requirements to keep their enrollments up.

Humanities departments that are succeeding are able to do so by diversifying their faculty and curricula, emphasizing community engagement and programmatic interdisciplinarity, and providing financial incentives—using a "show, don't tell" approach to demonstrate the value of the humanities to real life and to break down the distinction between town and gown. Embracing double majors has also proven successful. However, administrative hurdles have prevented departments from reaping maximum benefits from these strategies—as tenure lines are lost, diversifying faculty and sustaining labor-intensive high-impact pedagogical practices becomes more difficult. Chairs did not delve into detail about how resources are allocated at their institutions based on enrollment and the number of students in a major, but their comments on the lack of administrative support emphasize the significant impact dwindling resource allocation is having.

3. Humanities chairs believe a massive marketing campaign is needed to sustain their disciplines.

Humanities chairs have articulated the value proposition of their disciplines in terms of career preparedness. However, this message is not being received by students, administrators, or society as a whole, likely due to differing worldviews and priorities about what the purpose of higher education should be. How this communication disconnect can be resolved is unclear. Chairs believe a campaign is needed to market the humanities, but they are not able to do it alone.

4. Humanities chairs wish for a more critical and measured approach to generative AI from their institutions.

Chairs have an overall negative outlook on generative AI, which they encounter primarily as a threat to their students' academic integrity. Chairs report humanities faculty are attempting to adapt their teaching strategies but are overwhelmed by the speed of change. Most are dissatisfied with their institutions' responses to AI. Chairs believe humanists can make valuable contributions to the conversation about generative AI—if their institutions include them. Only a few chairs associate generative AI with positive outcomes for student learning.

Appendix

The following tables provide demographic information about the humanities departments represented in the focus groups.

Census Region

Midwest	8
Northeast	5
South	12
West	5

Type

Private	15
Public	15
HBCU	3

Carnegie Classification

Doctoral	15
Master's	8
Baccalaureate	7

Discipline

English	8
LOTE	5
History	4
Philosophy	3
Ethnic Studies	3
Classics	2
Gender Studies	2
Combined (multiple humanities programs within one department)	3

Size (number of majors who graduated in 2025)

Small (<20)	13
Medium (20–80)	11
Large (>80)	6

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