

The State of the Humanities circa 2022

Robert B. Townsend & Norman Bradburn

Depending on one's perspective, the situation for the humanities can appear either quite dire or in a state of renewal and vitality. In the four-year colleges and universities that often set the terms of discussion about the field, the situation is troubling by almost any measure. Even prior to the pandemic, humanities departments were being closed and students were gravitating toward other fields in their selection of majors. Nevertheless, leaders in the public humanities (such as state humanities councils and academic centers for the public humanities) look to a wider range of engagements with the humanities beyond the academy and report that their programs and activities are quite robust (or at least were so, before the COVID-19 pandemic). Since the Great Recession, these divisions have grown increasingly stark, as the downward trends in academia have steepened, while visitation rates at other public humanities institutions – such as art museums and historic sites – have showed a modest rebound.¹ The question remains: how are these trends related and which better reflects the long-term health of the field?

As a starting point for this volume, this essay summarizes recent data about the state of the field both within and beyond the walls of academia. One of the great challenges lies in the gap between the public and academic sides of the humanities, and a more fundamental question about what the humanities actually represent. For the purposes of this essay (and for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators project, which serves as the source of much of the information), the definition we use is quite expansive. We include a broad array of activities in which Americans engage as part of their personal and work lives: for example, early childhood reading; K–12 and higher education in humanities subjects; later-in-life engagement with the humanities through books, the Internet, television, and cultural institutions; as well as descriptive writing and technical reading on the job. This definition captures the broader engagements of the public in a variety of humanistic practices that extend beyond academic disciplines and research. What it does not resolve is the relationship between the humanities as represented in the larger range of humanistic activities and the humanities represented in the academic disciplines. The latter are more self-consciously aware of their

position in a field of activity under that label – though in our experience writing about the field, that consciousness tends to be partial and secondary to their identities as members of disciplines – and they often supply personnel and material to public humanities institutions. Whether that relationship is or should be unidirectional (with academia training specialists who in turn develop and deliver materials to a receptive public audience) or bidirectional (with the public shaping and influencing the choices and activities of the professionals) is a recurring question throughout this issue.

Regardless of what one might imagine as the ideal relationship between the public and the academic humanities, one of the first challenges is the limited public awareness of the field as an organized form of activity. Early exploratory work for a recent Humanities Indicators survey of the general public proved instructive in this regard; it suggested that Americans have diverse – and often errant – conceptions of what the term *humanities* means. When asked to define it, most respondents fell back on labels and words that would be familiar to faculty or public humanists. But we also found that a substantial number of Americans hear the term and connect it to other concepts, including good works (such as giving blood or charitable giving). Others thought the term could or should encompass anything that has to do with human beings, including science and medicine.²

Regardless of how a member of the public might pour meaning into the term when they hear the word *humanities*, they are likely to engage with some humanities content and humanistic practices on a regular basis. Many of them watch historical documentaries, read books, search for and engage with humanities content on the Internet, and engage in ethical decision-making, even if they may not conceive of those activities under a singular umbrella term. But their engagements tend not to align in ways that will seem meaningful to academic humanists. For instance, we found the patterns of engagement are more likely to fall along modes of engagement than disciplinary content: frequent readers tend to read both fiction and nonfiction, people who watch historical documentaries also tend to watch documentaries on other humanities content, and those who look to the Internet for one type of humanities content are more likely to look there for others. Conversely, those who watch historical television shows appear no more likely to engage with historical content in other forms than other Americans. The results of the survey serve as an important reminder that the conceptual boundaries and distinctions that often seem quite meaningful to practitioners in the field rarely carry outside of academic debates.

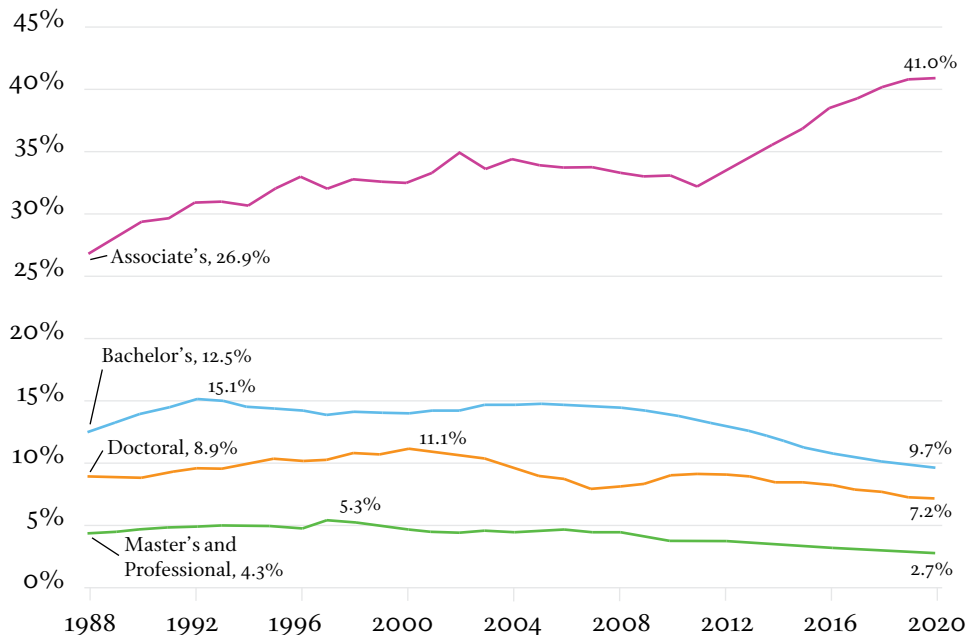
While the findings underscore fundamental differences between the ways humanities practitioners think of the field and the ways the public engages with it, the survey also offered evidence about the positive relationship between the

humanities and the public. Substantial shares of Americans reported engaging at least occasionally in some of these activities, particularly watching shows with historical content and reading fiction and nonfiction books. And when these activities are wrapped together under the umbrella term *humanities* (and further defined as “studying or participating in activities related to literature, languages, history, and philosophy”), more than 80 percent of American adults hold very positive views about the field. These positive attitudes extend from the personal and societal benefits to the public to the need to learn the subjects of the humanities.³ Taken together, the survey results seem to confirm the positive stories from those who engage with the public humanities.

But that is not the story that one is likely to read in the higher education media, where the focus tends to center on the field as an academic enterprise. In this sphere, the humanities tend to be defined more narrowly, in terms of areas of research and study at an advanced level, typically in one of the disciplines associated with the field.⁴ Here there is ample cause for concern, most visibly in the trends of students earning degrees in the field. From 2012 to 2020, the annual number of humanities bachelor’s degrees awarded fell almost 16 percent, with some of the larger disciplines, such as history, losing almost one-third of their majors. At the same time, the number of degrees awarded to students in the STEM fields has grown substantially: for instance, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in engineering and in the health and medical sciences increased by more than 56 percent over the same period. As a result, the humanities have greatly diminished as measured by their share of students earning undergraduate degrees. As of 2020, the humanities were conferring less than 10 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, the lowest level on record (see Figure 1). Given that faculty members in humanities departments often rely on those students to make a case for departmental resources, they can hardly be blamed for feeling endangered, just as administrators may look at those trends and wonder if they need the same number of faculty members in the department.

The reasons for the recent declines in humanities majors remain understudied but appear more complex than the explanations that typically appear in the media. In many of the articles reviewed for this essay, the problem seems reduced to two variables: rising college costs and student debt, on one side, and relatively low earnings for humanities graduates, on the other. These factors undoubtedly play a part, especially given how often the earnings of humanities majors are juxtaposed with those of STEM majors in news articles on the subject. But this earnings differential has been true for decades and seems unlikely to be the only explanation (though in the context of sharply rising college costs and debt levels, it should not be entirely discounted). The median earnings of humanities graduates are certainly lower than those of their counterparts from many of the STEM subjects, but they are still substantially higher than among those who never earned a college degree. Moreover, when one looks at less tangible measures of job and life satisfac-

Figure 1
Humanities as a Share of All Degrees Awarded at Level, 1988–2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Completions Survey, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/7/completions>.

tion for humanities graduates, one finds ample evidence that they are as satisfied with their jobs and their lives as college graduates from almost every other field.⁵

So where might the problem for college majors lie? Consider a few other possible factors. The number of students earning dual enrollment credits while in high school as well as AP credits from tests in humanities subjects has skyrocketed over the past two decades. This is occurring at the same time that the number of students earning associate's degrees in the humanities and liberal arts in community colleges has grown to unprecedented levels. As Figure 1 shows, while the humanities have been losing ground at every other degree level, they have been rising sharply among those earning degrees from community colleges. While these credits create less expensive routes into and through a four-year college degree, they can have the unintended effect of diverting students around the introductory courses at four-year colleges and universities that have traditionally served as an entrée into a college major.

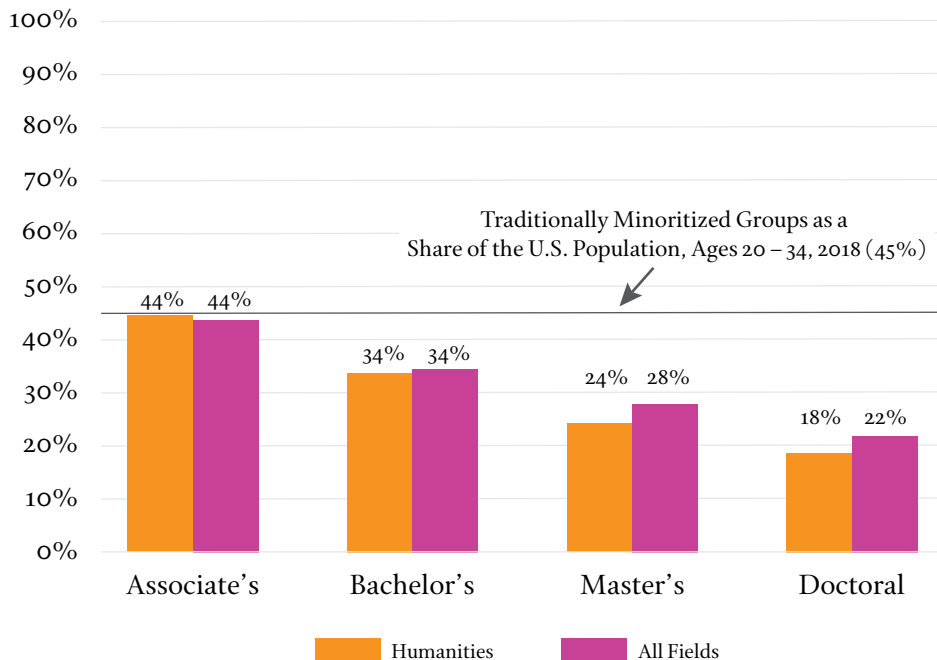
A separate variable that turns up in recent surveys of college alumni from the humanities indicates that they are among the least likely to see a connection between their college major and the jobs they take after earning their degree. In a 2019 survey, less than one-third of the humanities graduates in the workforce thought there was a close connection between their job and their degree.⁶ There are many intangible virtues of studying in the field – such as the value of exploring a subject for its own sake – but as tuition relative to postcollege earnings reaches historic highs, promoting these less tangible values might not be enough. At the very least, faculty members might consider greater transparency in their syllabi and class work, helping students to see that they are also gaining important “transferable” skills in their classes – research, organization, and written and oral communication – and not just specific content knowledge.

The demographics of those entering study in the humanities also remain a significant issue for the field. The share of students from minoritized groups earning degrees in the humanities is close to the average among all college graduates, particularly at the undergraduate level (see Figure 2). That sets the bar exceptionally low, however, because there is a lack of diversity in the college student population as a whole. Only among students receiving associate’s degrees is the share of students from minoritized groups (Alaska Native, American Indian, Asian American, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander), at 44 percent, near the total share in the population; from there it falls to 34 percent among those receiving bachelor’s degrees and 18 percent among those receiving PhDs in the field, less than half the share in the population overall.

The differences between degree levels speak to a challenge for the field, but also an opportunity. If the field could attract more students earning associate’s degrees and develop mentorship and retention programs that aided them from one degree level to the next, it could improve on both the numbers of students earning bachelor’s and doctoral degrees and the enduring lack of demographic diversity within the field.

While the specific causes of the recent declines in humanities majors remain murky, the effects of those declines on the academic professions that educate those students appear clearer. From 2008 to 2010, academic job ads posted with scholarly societies in the field fell more than 30 percent (much of that during the Great Recession, but with further losses in the years since).⁷ In some of the largest fields, such as the modern languages, job openings have continued to decline, while others had only modest recoveries followed by additional declines during the pandemic. While many doctoral programs in the field have started to cut back admissions, the field still conferred almost 5,500 PhDs in the United States in 2020 (9 percent higher than the number awarded in 2008). Given the sustained nature of this job crisis, many of the largest disciplines have turned to promoting career training and employment options for PhDs beyond academia.

Figure 2
Share of Degrees Awarded to Minoritized Groups, 2015–2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Completions Survey, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/7/completions>. Note: Values can differ slightly due to rounding.

This returns us to the value of a thriving humanities enterprise outside of academia. For decades, the National Endowment for the Humanities and its state affiliates have supported thousands of institutions ranging from small local historical societies to museums and nonprofits with large multimillion dollar budgets. A recent effort to develop a pilot census of humanities organizations turned up 45,752 institutions, including 24,022 libraries and archives, 8,033 museums, and 13,654 historical institutions.⁸

These organizations have provided employment opportunities for humanities graduates, but more than that, they have provided another vital public face for the field. In the national survey on the humanities, almost half of Americans reported they had visited art and history museums at least “sometimes” in the previous year. Much larger shares of Americans engaged with the humanities through television, the Internet, and podcasts, though we do not know the source or quality of

the information they were consuming.⁹ All that speaks to broad national interest in output and activities from the humanities.

But one notable area of concern for the field is the declining amount of time Americans spend reading for personal interest. From 2003 to 2018, the average time spent reading for leisure fell from twenty-two minutes to just sixteen minutes (compared with an average of almost three hours watching television and nearly thirty minutes playing games and using computers for leisure).¹⁰ To the extent reading remains a fundamental aspect of the humanities enterprise – especially for the teaching of the humanities at colleges and universities – the waning of that particular capacity in the populace should be a significant concern.

The trends and findings here need an important caveat: they only represent points of time in the past. We both have been studying the field long enough to watch dire predictions about the state of the field turn around, occasionally into fragile states of optimism. The declines in humanities majors and the job crisis for PhDs of the present had their precursors in the 1970s, and the programming developed to address those changes often evaporated as the trends reversed. The field would be better prepared for the future if it drew lessons from its past, built structures and institutions that could carry through waves of crisis and optimism, and forged strong and enduring relationships across all the institutions that represent the humanities.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the share of the public that had visited a museum or historic site increased 4.4 percentage points from 2012 to 2017, while the share visiting art museums increased almost 3 percentage points. See National Endowment for the Arts, *U.S. Trends in Arts Attendance and Literary Reading: 2002–2017: A First Look at Results from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2018), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2017-sppapreviewREV-sept2018.pdf>.
- ² Humanities Indicators, *The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a 2019 Survey of the Public's Attitudes & Engagement* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 4.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 30–32.
- ⁴ See, for instance, Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565/>; and Kevin Carey, “The Bleak Job Landscape of Adjunctopia for Ph.D.s,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/upshot/academic-job-crisis-phd.html>.
- ⁵ Humanities Indicators, *The State of the Humanities 2021: Graduates in the Workforce & Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021).
- ⁶ Original analysis by the Humanities Indicators of data from the National Science Foundation, National Survey of College Graduates, 2019, published in *The State of the Humanities 2021*, 26.
- ⁷ Humanities Indicators, *The State of the Humanities 2022: From Graduate Education to the Workforce* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2022).
- ⁸ Humanities Indicators, “Welcome to NIHO: Humanities Organizations by the Numbers,” National Inventory of Humanities Organizations, <https://niho.knack.com/niho#overview/> (accessed April 5, 2022).
- ⁹ The findings in the American Academy survey of the public were quite similar to the results from a related survey by the American Historical Association. See American Historical Association, “History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey,” <https://www.historians.org/history-culture-survey>.
- ¹⁰ Original analysis by the Humanities Indicators of data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, available online at “Time Spent Reading,” <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/public-life/time-spent-reading>.