

From Matriculation to Completion: How Do Humanities Majors Compare?

In recent years, the Humanities Indicators staff has received numerous questions about whether college students who start a humanities degree are more or less likely to finish it than those who start other majors, and how the movement into and out of humanities majors compares to those of other fields of study. To answer these questions, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences commissioned an analysis by National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), the source of the most comprehensive data available on the pathways taken by students through higher education. For this analysis, NSC examined entering students' choice of major in fall 2017—upon the start of a program of studies toward a bachelor's degree—and then their status as of June 2024. Except where noted below, this cohort is the unit of analysis for all that follows. While the study focuses on only one group of students, it offers a useful starting point for further consideration of the humanities major, with three suggestive findings:

1. Students who start their studies in a humanities discipline are slightly more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within seven years than college students generally (and even more likely to do so if they completed an associate's degree before starting at a four-year institution).
2. Among students who completed a degree in a humanities discipline, more than half had started their studies in another major—either a nonhumanities field or a general liberal arts major.
3. Among students who completed a degree with a second major, the share who had humanities as a second major was twice the size of the share who

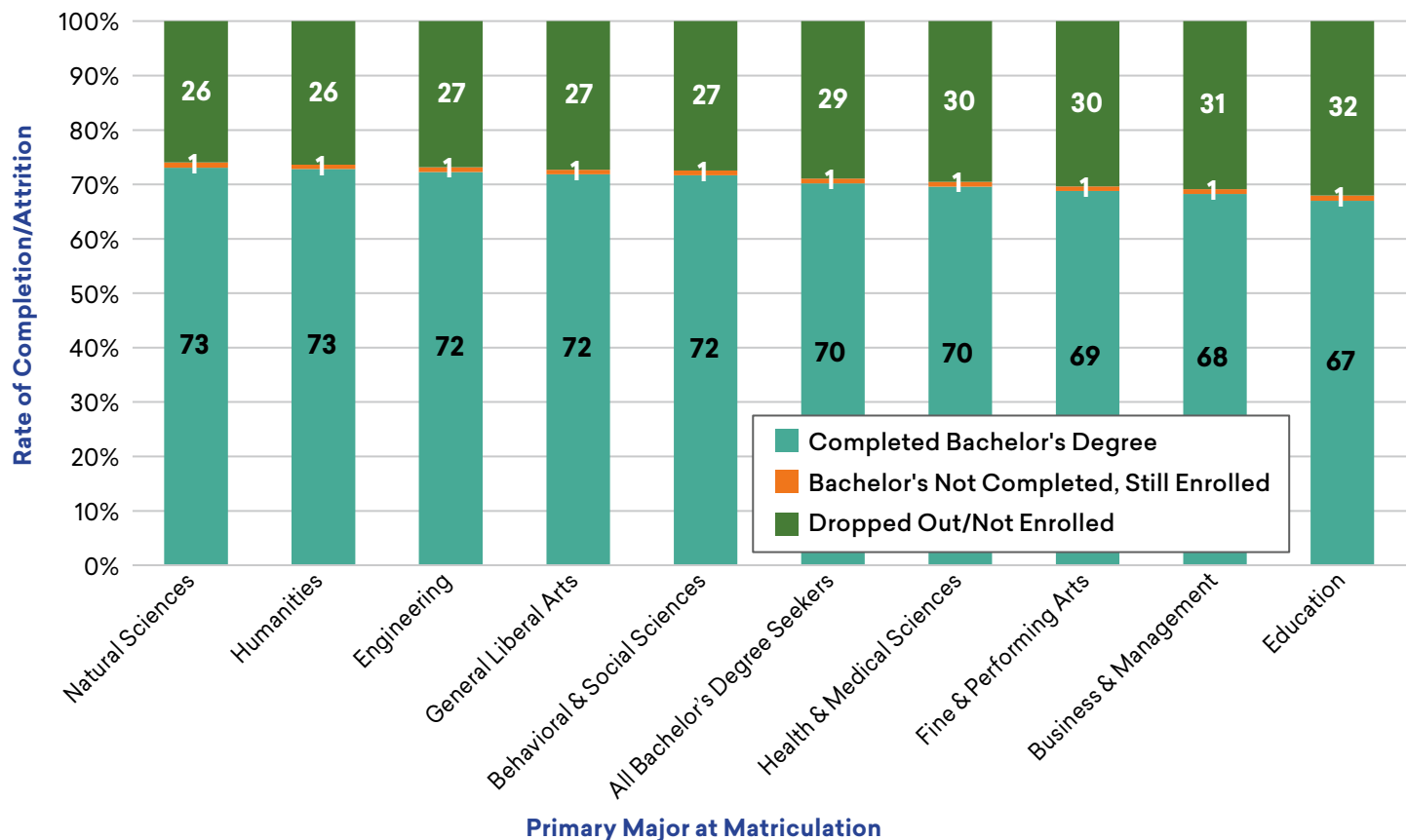
graduated with a primary major in the humanities. This was primarily due to a disproportionately large share of humanities majors completing a second major in another humanities discipline.

The study also examined the recent trend in enrolled humanities majors and found a steady decline from fall 2017 to 2023, which indicates that the decline in students earning humanities degrees is likely to continue for at least a few more years.

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Prior to this research, most of what we knew about college majors came from annual data on degree completions reported by colleges and universities to the U.S. Department of Education. The degree completions data provide invaluable information about the numbers of students completing degrees in particular fields and their demographics.¹ But that data set provides only counts of degree completions and basic demographic information about graduates. It tells us nothing about changes of major, relationships between double majors, or how the fields compare in completion rates. This study attempts to fill in some of those gaps, albeit for only one cohort of students.

Figure 1: Completion and Attrition Among Students Starting a Bachelor's Degree Program in Fall 2017 (Status as of Summer 2024), by Primary Major Declared in 2017



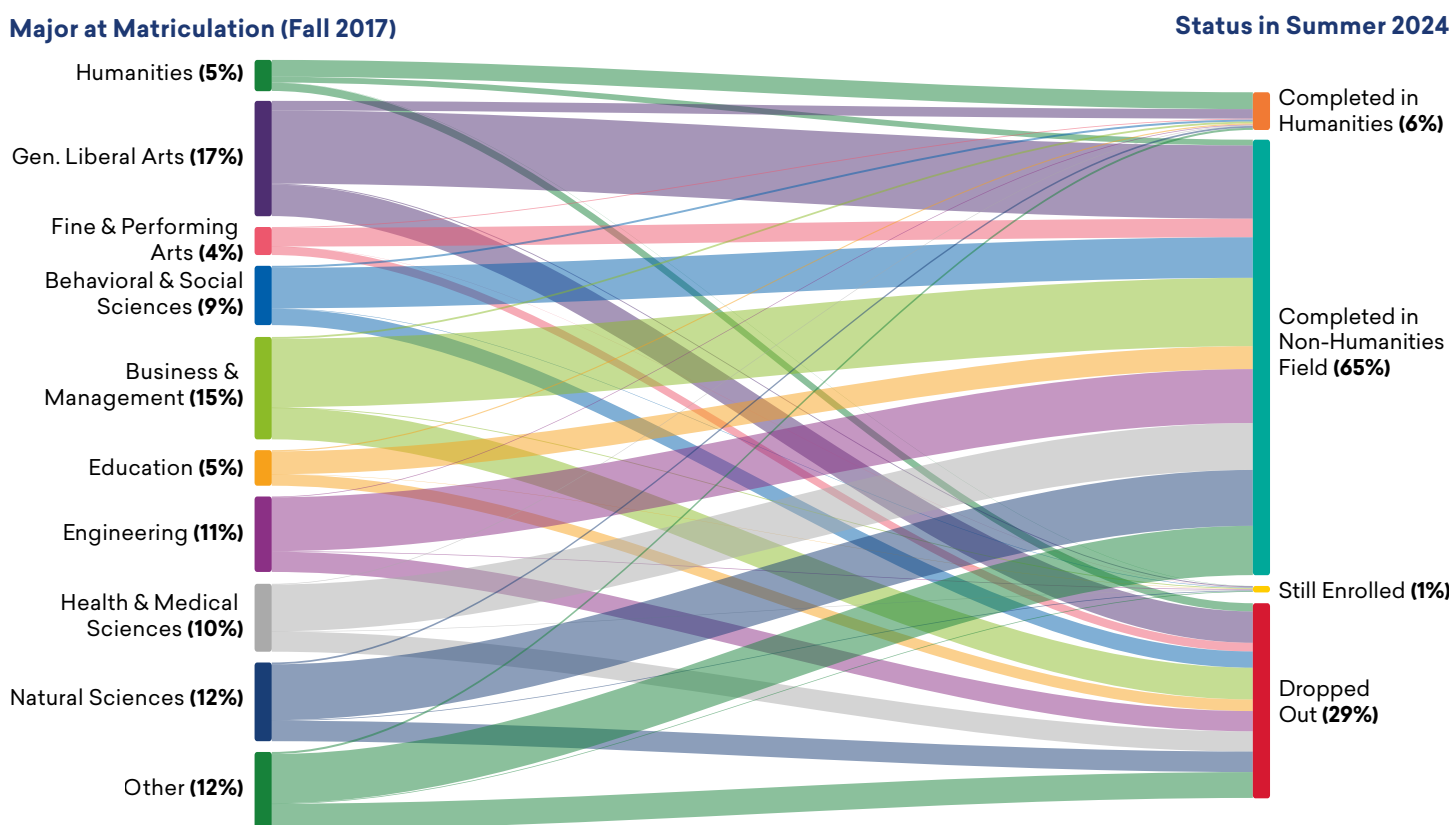
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Who Enters a Humanities Major?

According to the National Clearinghouse, almost two million students started working toward a bachelor's degree in fall 2017; of that number, 91,751 (4.6%) selected a primary major in one of the humanities disciplines. We know from Department of Education data that an average of around 7.5% of the bachelor's degrees awarded from 2017 to 2022 were in the humanities.² The difference between matriculations and degrees is explained by the humanities gaining more majors from other fields than it lost to either attrition or its own students switching to another major.

Among the students in the fall 2017 cohort, 72.8% of those who started with a humanities major had completed a bachelor's degree by summer 2024, slightly higher than the average completion rate of 70.2% among all students entering that year (Figure 1). Among the majors declared at matriculation (first entry into baccalaureate studies), the completion rates ranged from a high of 73.1% of those who declared a major in the natural sciences (a fraction of a point higher than the humanities) to a low of 67% among those who started with a major in education.

Figure 2: Noncompletion and Change of Major Among Bachelor's Degree Seekers, from Matriculation (in Fall 2017) to Summer 2024, by Primary Major Declared at Matriculation



(Interactive chart at <https://api.everviz.com/share/sybXIZwLO>)

Slightly more than 26% of the students who declared a humanities major in fall 2017 had either dropped out or were no longer enrolled in a degree program by summer 2024. (A remaining 0.8% were still actively pursuing the degree.) This attrition rate was modestly lower than the 28.9% among all bachelor's degree seekers (while 0.9% were still enrolled toward a degree). The highest attrition rate was found among those who started with an education major (32.0%).

This study also examined the subpopulation of students who had completed an associate's degree before matriculation into baccalaureate studies. These students accounted for 10.5% of the entering cohort but 15.3% of the students declaring a major in the

humanities. Humanities majors in this group had the highest completion rates. Just over 81% of them had completed their studies, and only 18.2% had dropped out by summer 2024. The completion rate for all matriculating students with an associate's degree was 77.0%, with the lowest completion rate (73.6%) among those who entered engineering programs (which include computer science in our tabulations).

Movement Between Majors

One of the primary goals of this study was to determine how much migration between majors occurred from matriculation to completion. Figure 2 shows

the movement of students from the time they matriculated into baccalaureate studies to their status as of summer 2024 (on the right). This shows the shares of students who left their studies without a degree (28.9% of the original cohort of students), were still enrolled toward a degree (almost 1%), had earned a degree in the humanities (5.6%), or had completed a degree in a nonhumanities field (64.6%).

Of the almost 92,000 students who began their studies with a major in the humanities, 49,808 (54%) finished with a degree in the humanities. This was slightly below the rates at which students completed their degree in their original major in other fields, including in engineering (58%) and business (57%), but similar to the rates for students starting in the arts, social and behavioral sciences, and health and medical sciences. The humanities' rate was substantially higher than that of education or the natural sciences (both around 46%).

If one excludes the students who dropped out of their studies, approximately 8.0% of the students from the fall 2017 cohort who graduated (111,437) did so with a primary degree in the humanities. This was up substantially from the 4.6% of the entering cohort who declared a humanities major, due to 61,628 students migrating into the humanities from a different major. As a result, even though the humanities lost a substantial portion of the students who started in its programs—due either to attrition or a change of major—the field gained a much larger number of students who switched over from other majors. Indeed, only the humanities and the behavioral/social sciences had a net increase in the number of students from matriculation to graduation. As a result, 55% of the students who earned a degree in the humanities had entered college intending to major in another subject.

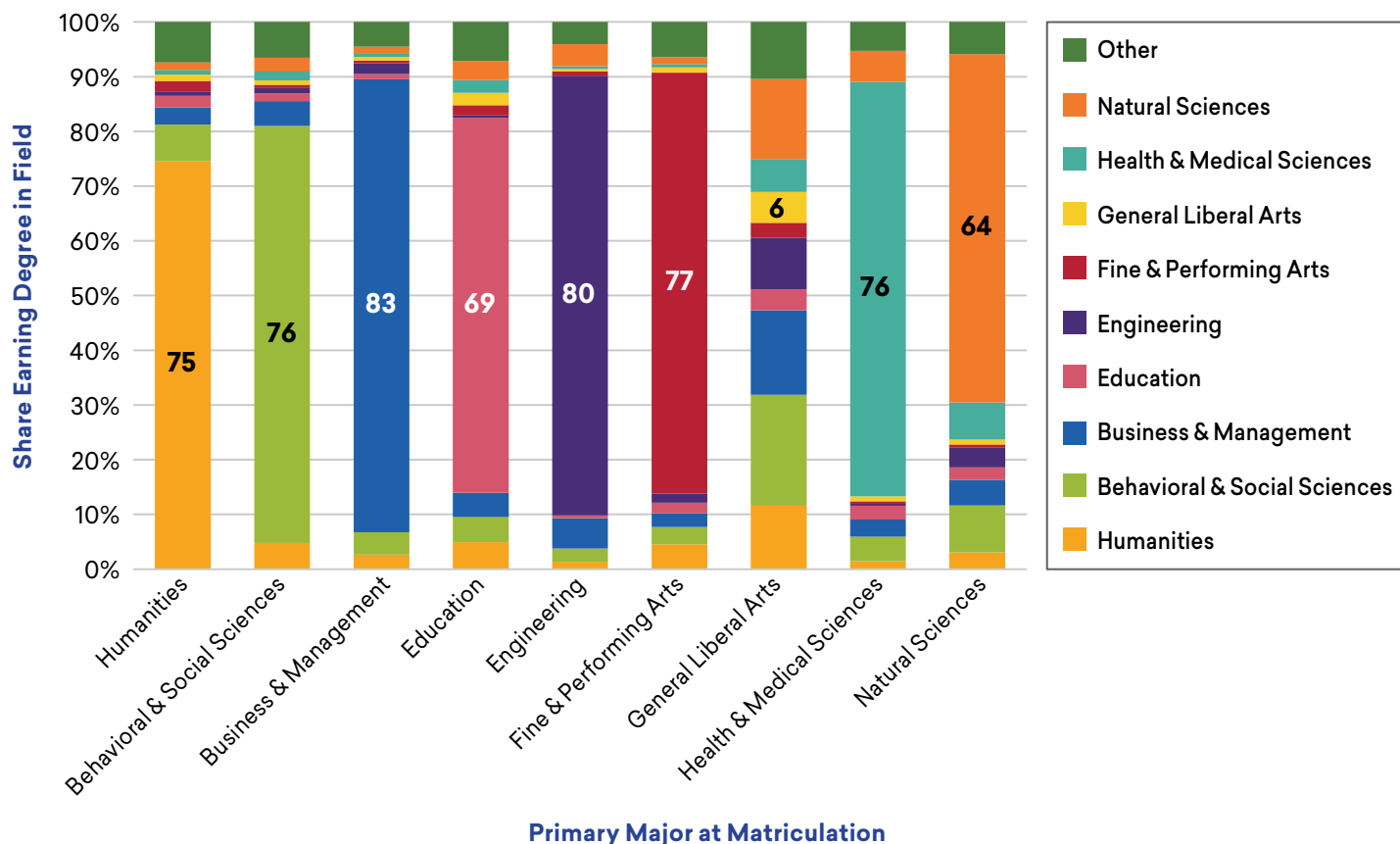
As Figure 2 also shows, an exceptionally large number of students declared (or were assigned to) a general liberal arts major upon entering their studies.³ (A question for future study might be whether the general liberal arts category is now serving as a

substitute for what were once classified as “undeclared” students, whose numbers were quite small in this cohort.) Most of those students switched to another major before they graduated. Despite the apparent proximity to the humanities (past research by the Humanities Indicators staff found that these fields generally require a substantial amount of coursework in humanities subjects prior to graduation), only a small portion of these students migrated over to the field, while most of them moved to nonhumanities fields. Nevertheless, the largest source of students who switched into one of the humanities disciplines was from the general liberal arts, as 11.6% of degree completers who initially declared in that category finished with a major in the humanities, accounting for 25% of the students who finished with a humanities degrees and almost half of the migrants into humanities from other fields.

The students with an associate's degree were much less likely to begin their baccalaureate program with a major in general liberal arts and substantially more likely to declare a major in one of the humanities disciplines at matriculation. Only 5.6% of those with an associate's degree started with a major in the general liberal arts (compared to 17.1% among all matriculating students), and 6.7% of the students who started their studies with an associate's degree declared a humanities major upon matriculation (a share almost half again as large as that of all students who began undergraduate studies in 2017). This suggests the importance of the early years of study—when students are taking general education requirements—as a period of sorting and reassessment of the initial major, but merits further study.⁴ This study did not collect any further information about *when* the movement between majors had occurred.

Figure 3 shows how many students who completed a degree (at any point in the intervening seven years) remained in the same broad field of study at graduation or had switched to another field. Sizable majorities of the students who started in every field except general liberal arts finished a degree in the same field. Among the students who started with

Figure 3: Primary Field of Degree, by Primary Major Declared at Matriculation (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2023)



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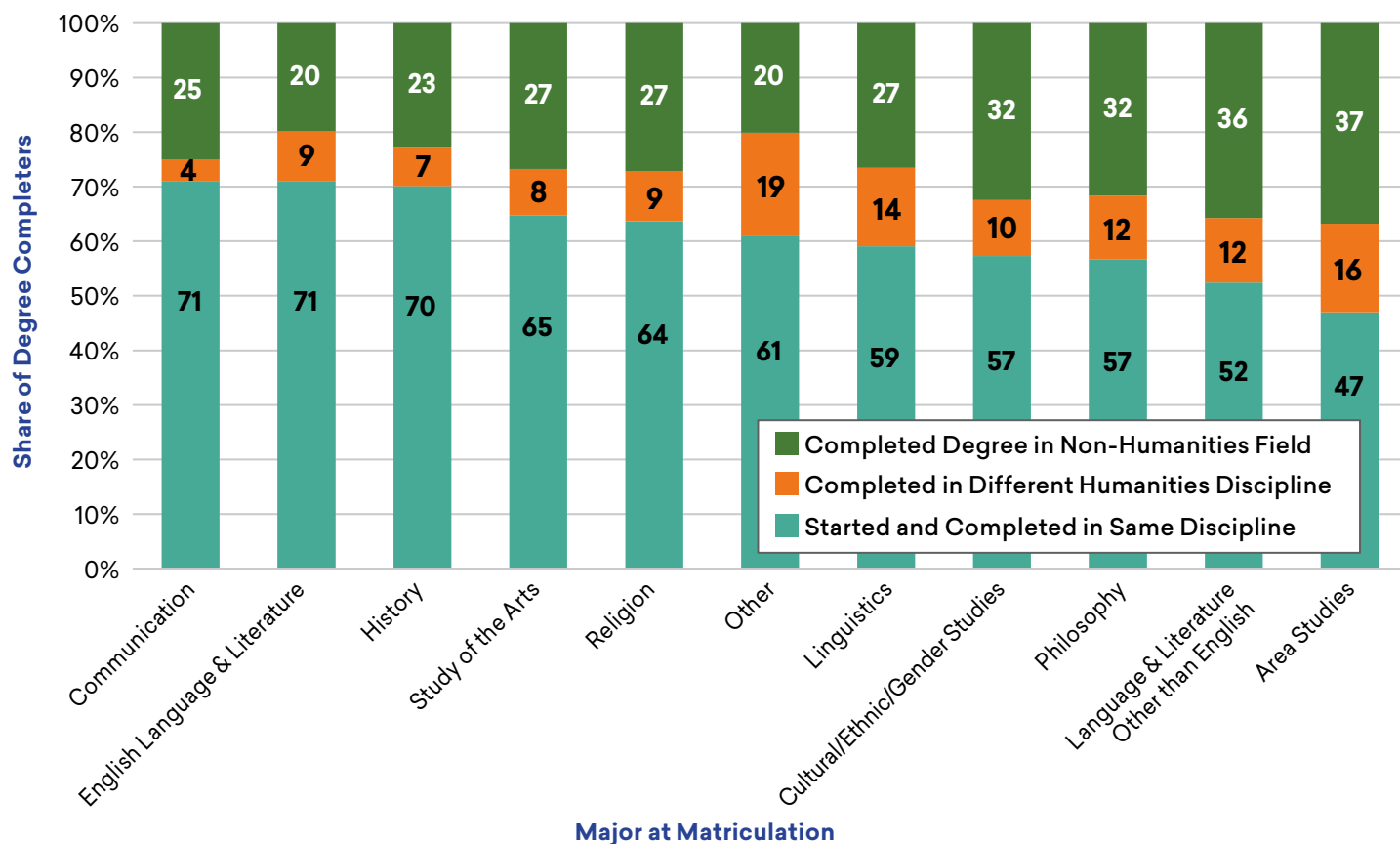
a major in a humanities discipline and completed a degree, 74.5% finished with a primary degree in the humanities. This was similar to students who started in the social/behavioral sciences, the health/medical sciences, and the fine and performing arts but modestly lower than the share among graduates who started in business and management (82.8%) and engineering (80.4%). The natural sciences had a comparatively small share stick with the field to the end (just 64%).

The fields differed substantially in where students who left the major wound up. Degree completers who started in the humanities were most likely to move to either one of the smaller vocational

subjects lumped under the “Other” category (accounting for 7.4% of the students who started in the humanities and completed a degree) or the social and behavioral sciences (6.7%). The social and behavioral sciences also had a substantial portion of their students move on to subjects in the Other category (6.6%), but the second-largest movement was to the humanities (4.8%).

A related question concerns the extent of outmigration from the individual humanities disciplines. (For this analysis, both first and second majors at matriculation and graduation were considered, with a student counted in each discipline for which they had declared a major.) As Figure 4 demonstrates,

Figure 4: Retention Rates Among Degree Completers Who Matriculated With a Primary Major in the Humanities, by Discipline (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2023)



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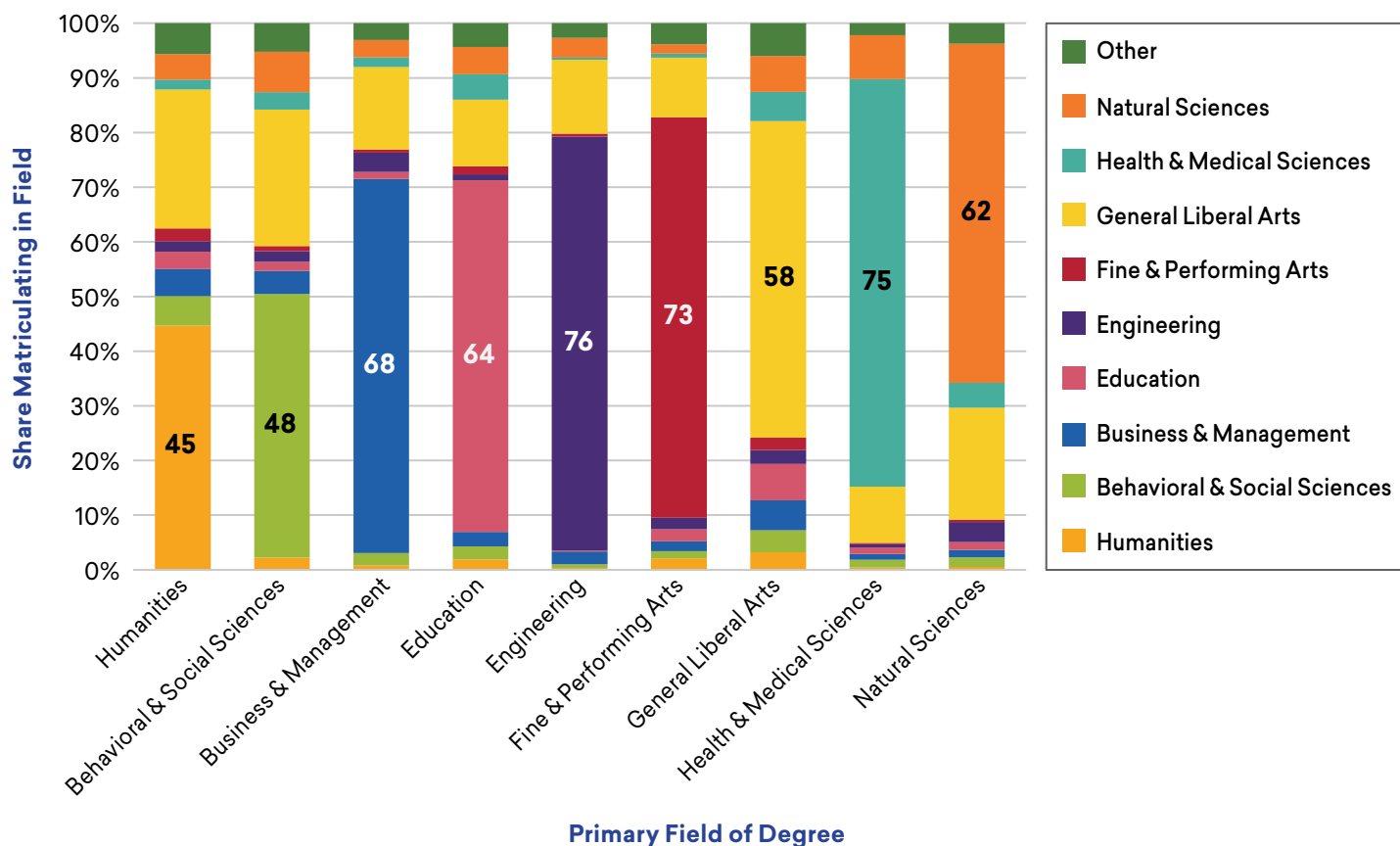
substantial differences in retention rate were observed among the disciplines.

The three largest disciplines in the humanities (communication, English, and history) had the highest retention rates, with slightly more than 70% of degree completers who started out in the discipline graduating with a degree (either first or second) in that same discipline. Except for area studies, all the remaining humanities disciplines had retention rates ranging from 52% to 65%. Area studies was the only discipline in which less than half of degree completers (47%) who started in the discipline graduated with a degree in it.

Most degree completers who left their original humanities discipline left the humanities field entirely. The most extreme example of this was in communication, where 87% of the completers who moved away from the discipline earned a degree in a nonhumanities field instead. Even for disciplines considered to be in the traditional core of the field (the languages, history, and philosophy), more than two-thirds of completers who left the subject also left the field.

If one reverses the perspective and looks at where the students who completed a degree in each of the fields originated, the extent of the movement between fields becomes more apparent. Just 44.7% of

Figure 5: Primary Field of Major Declared at Matriculation, by Primary Field of Degree (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2023)



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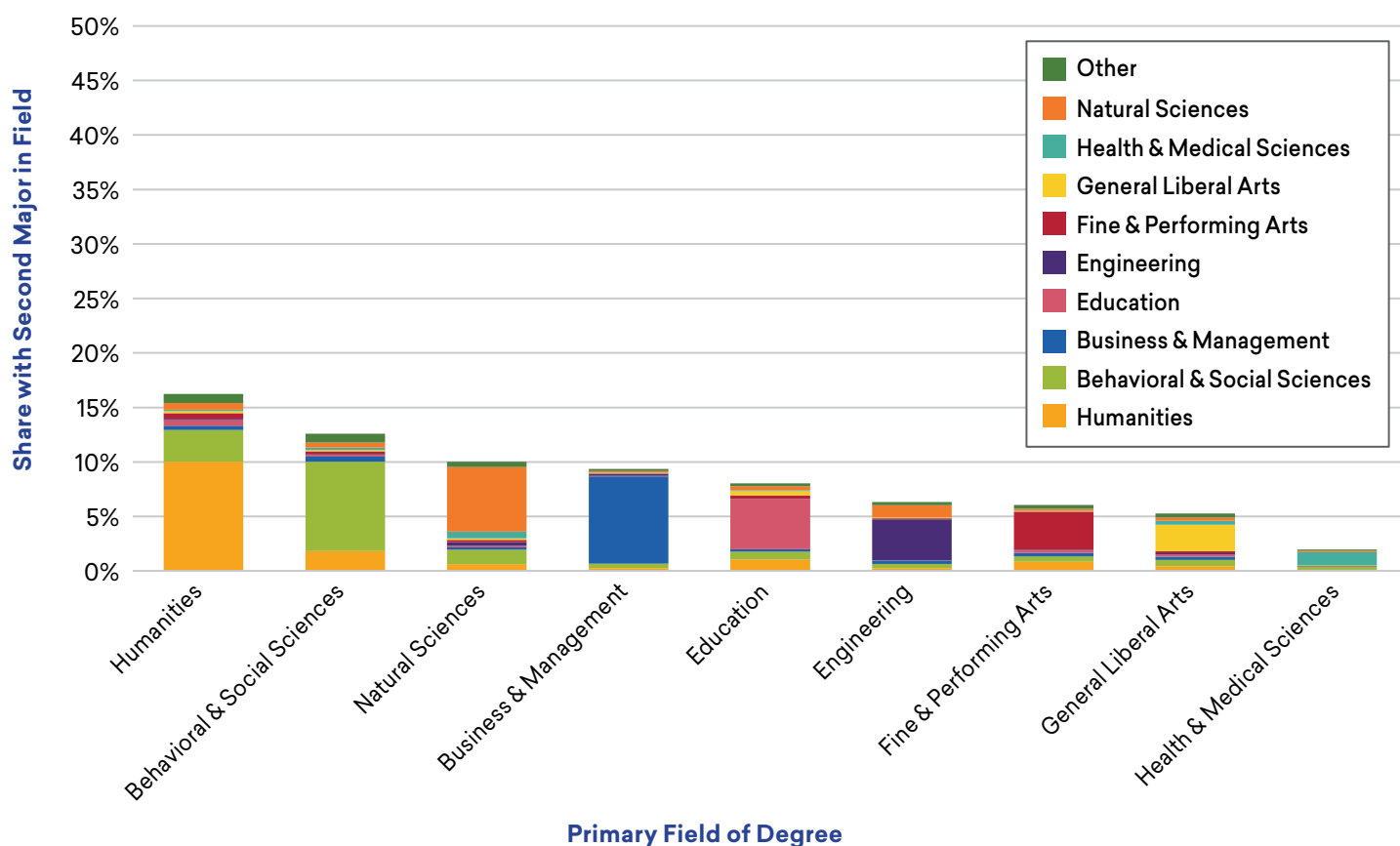
the students completing degrees in the humanities had started their studies with a major in one of the disciplines, as more than half of the graduates started in another subject area—the lowest share of any field.

Comparing Figure 3 and Figure 5 highlights not only the success of the humanities in retaining students who started in the field but also its ability to attract students from other fields. In addition to the sizable percentage of humanities graduates who started out with general liberal arts majors, 5% migrated from each of the following fields: social and behavioral sciences, business and management, the natural sciences, and “Other.” If one excludes the

general liberal arts, the humanities drew the largest share of its graduates from other fields, though the behavioral/social sciences were a close second.

In comparison to the humanities and social/behavioral sciences, the natural sciences stand out both for a lower retention rate among students starting in the field and a comparatively small amount of in-migration from other fields. This study was not designed to explore the reasons for these differences, only to surface the underlying patterns of movement between the fields, but these data point to a subject for further study. For instance, while some discussion in the media points to the humanities as

Figure 6: “Second” Major at Graduation, by Primary/“First” Major (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2024)



(Interactive version at <https://api.everviz.com/share/0klxpvPvu>)

“easy” majors that a student might retreat to, other survey research notes that faculty in the humanities and social sciences do a much better job of mentoring and supporting their students, thereby attracting more of them into their subjects.⁵

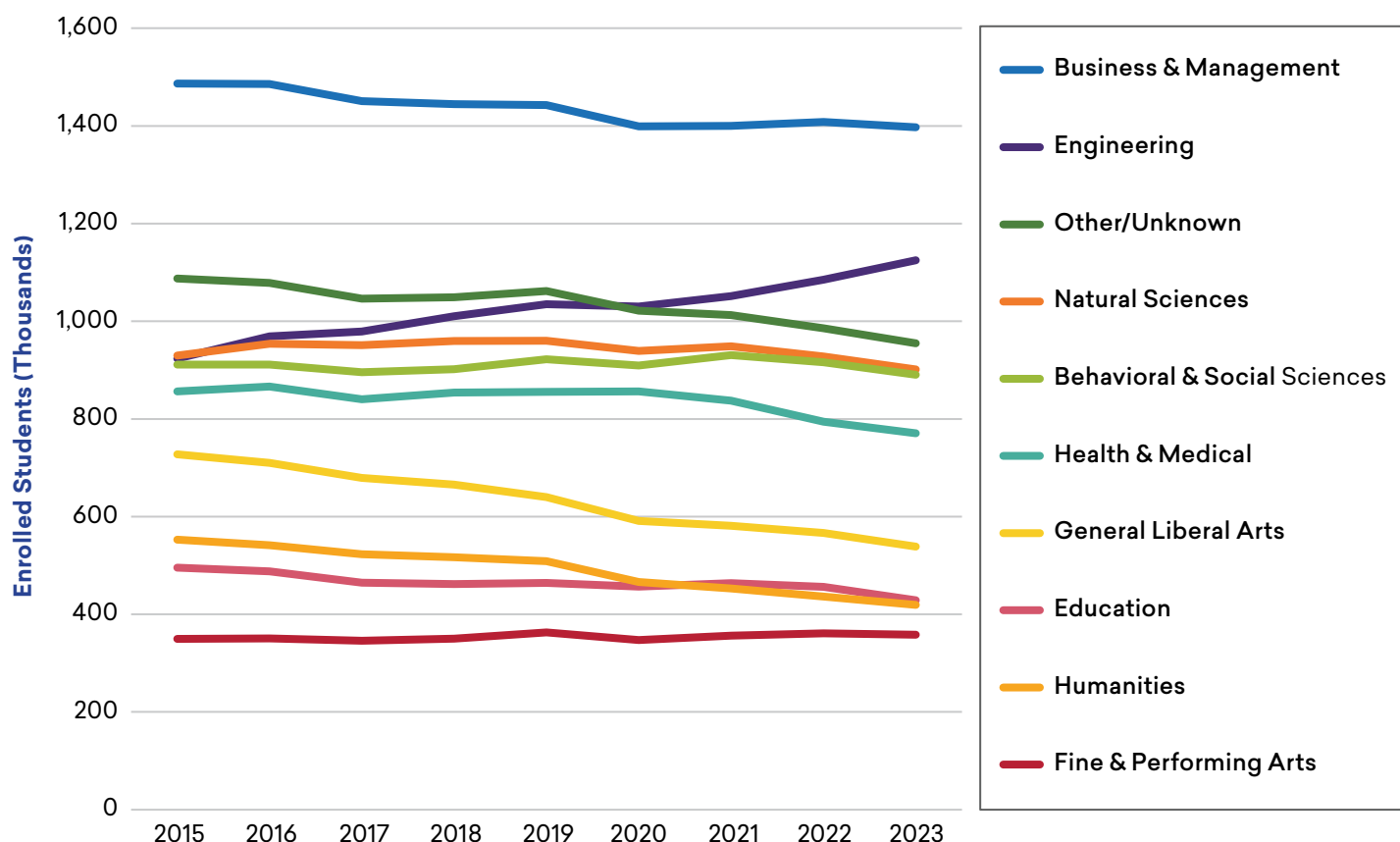
What Is the Relationship Between First and Second Majors?

In addition to the movement between majors, this study also examined the relationship between first and second majors among students and the role the humanities play among those second majors. As

shown in Figure 6, only a small portion of college graduates finished with a second major. Among students who started their studies toward a bachelor’s degree in fall 2017 and graduated by the end of the 2023–24 academic year, only 9% finished with a second major.⁶ Just over 16% of these second majors were in the humanities.

A comparatively large share of students who graduated with a primary major in the humanities—16.2%—also had a second major when they graduated. This was more than three percentage points higher than the next closest field—the behavioral and social sciences (12.6%).

Figure 7: Students Enrolled in a Bachelor’s Degree Program, by Field of Declared Primary Major, Fall 2015–Fall 2023



Of the approximately 16% of humanities degree completers who graduated with a second degree, 61.7% had their second major in another humanities discipline. This tendency to earn first and second majors in the same field was common to all the major fields. More than half of the students earning a second degree in one of the major academic fields received both primary and secondary degrees in the same field. Business and management majors stood out in this respect, as 85% of their second degrees were in the same field as the first. In every other field, the percentage was greater than 55%.

Among humanities graduates who earned a second degree, only the social and behavioral sciences accounted for a nonnegligible share of degrees outside the field, with almost 3% of humanities graduates earning a second degree of this type. Second degrees in the behavioral/social sciences represented 18% of the second degrees earned by humanities graduates. The share of humanities graduates earning a second degree in each of the other major fields was less than 1%. Conversely, among students earning degrees in the other fields, only small shares earned a second degree in the humanities, ranging from just 0.3% of both business/management and engineering graduates to 1.8% of graduates from the social and behavioral sciences.

What Might the Future Hold?

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) has been reporting a decline in the number of students pursuing bachelor's degrees and the number of students pursuing a major in the humanities in recent years. The number of enrolled humanities majors fell 24% from fall 2015 to fall 2023, with most of the decline occurring after 2019. General liberal arts enrollments dropped by roughly the same amount (26%). The total number of students working toward bachelor's degrees also fell over the 2015–2023 time period, but by a more modest 6%.

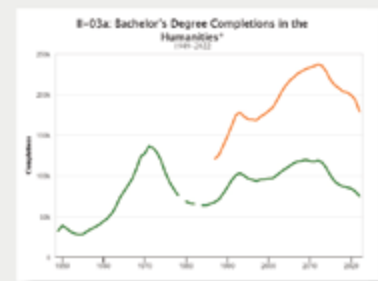
This decline was far more dramatic than that seen in other fields. The field with the second-largest drop, education, experienced a decline of 14%. The field with the largest number of undergraduate students (business and management) fell a mere 3%, and engineering majors increased by 9%.

This study was not intended to predict trends in the reported numbers of students earning humanities degrees in the near future, but the trends reported by NSC offer a troubling indicator of continued waning support for the field among students currently enrolled toward the degree. How it will translate into degree completions over the next few years remains to be seen.

These studies on baccalaureate students are intended to enhance our understanding of how students move through their programs and how many complete their intended degree. While the studies were not designed to explain when or why students choose to end their studies or change the trajectory of their studies, the HI will continue to explore these issues in the coming months. We welcome questions about these findings and suggestions for further areas of research. Please direct any inquiries to Robert Townsend, codirector of the HI, at rtownsend@amacad.org.



Humanities BY THE NUMBERS



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The Humanities Indicators is a project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Endnotes

1. The degree completions data serve as the basis for most of the analyses in the Humanities Indicators section on higher education: <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education>.
2. For more on the trends in degree recipients, see the Humanities Indicators, “Bachelor’s Degrees in the Humanities,” at <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities>.
3. The Humanities Indicators project includes the general liberal arts category in the humanities when tabulating degrees, as staff research found that they require a significant number of humanities courses for completion. However, our preliminary research for this study revealed that as a major selected upon entry, this category appears to serve as a substitute for the “undeclared” category at many institutions, with very different resulting behaviors from matriculation to completion. For that reason, the category is treated separately in this report.
4. A Department of Education transcript study in 2017 indicated that more than a third of students will change their majors within the first three years of entering college. National Center for Education Statistics, “Beginning College Students Who Change Their Majors Within 3 Years of Enrollment,” NCES 2018-434 (December 2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/2018/2018434/index.asp>, accessed August 18, 2024.
5. See, for instance, Stephen Glassman, “A More Rigorous Humanities,” Harvard Crimson, December 10, 2021, <https://www.thecrimson.com/column/a-more-human-humanities/article/2021/12/10/glassman-a-more-rigorous-humanities>, accessed August 23, 2024; Scott Muir and Younger Oliver, Strategies for Recruiting Students to the Humanities: A Comprehensive Overview (National Humanities Alliance); and Stephen Crabtree, “Student Support from Faculty, Mentors Varies by Major,” Gallup, January 24, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/246017/student-support-faculty-mentors-varies-major.aspx>, accessed October 20, 2024.
6. This study reaffirms staff concerns that second majors are being significantly undercounted in the data reported to the Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). IPEDS indicates that there were five second degrees being completed for every 100 primary degrees in 2022, while the Clearinghouse cohort had 8.6 second degrees for every 100 primary degrees. For more on these concerns, see the recent update Humanities Indicators, “Humanities as a Second Major,” at <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/humanities-second-major>.

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