The Strengthening MiHumanities initiative, a partnership between the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) and the Community College Research Center (CCRC), brought together faculty from community colleges and four-year institutions to explore issues related to strengthening pathways in the humanities and to develop roadmaps to create or strengthen pathways in each of the four selected disciplines of Communication, English, History, and Theater. Between October 2021 and 2022, MCCA hosted representatives from twenty-five community colleges and twenty-five bachelor’s degree-granting institutions for a series of workshops and conversations focused on the mechanics of transfer and the role of the humanities in the community college landscape. Researchers at CCRC analyzed data on course-taking patterns from the Michigan Education Research Institute (MERI) for students entering community colleges between 2009 and 2019 to support the faculty discussions.

Between 2009 and 2015, 1,757 students who transferred from a community college earned a bachelor’s degree in Communication. The Strengthening MiHumanities initiative selected Communication as a focal discipline based on previous statewide work in this discipline as part of the MiTransfer Pathways project. A MiTransfer Pathway in Communication was signed in 2020 and updated in 2022 with twenty-three community colleges and twenty universities participating. The pathway includes the three communication courses shown in the table below.

Courses in the MiTransfer Communication Pathway and number of students taking these courses at community colleges between 2009 and 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MiTransfer Pathway COM Courses</th>
<th>Headcount 2009-2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Communication</td>
<td>36,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Speaking</td>
<td>62,499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Communication</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Representatives from thirteen community colleges and eleven bachelor’s degree-granting institutions participated in the discussions of the Communication discipline. Although a vertical degree pathway to a Communication major has been created, gaps remain. These gaps provided a foundation for the discipline dialogues in Communication during the Strengthening MiHumanities initiative. The headcount for Small Group Communication, the smallest of the three courses, revealed an example of a gap in the pathway. The data indicates that eight community colleges offered a Small Group Communication course between 2009 and 2019. Since the MiTransfer Pathways agreement in Communication was signed in 2020, six additional community colleges have added a course in this area, increasing opportunities for Communication majors to complete this foundational course while enrolled in a community college.

Data from Michigan public and private bachelor’s degree-granting institutions suggest that 29% of Communication courses taken by community college students after transfer were lower division (100–200) level courses, with 11% at the 100 level. Many of these course titles include “fundamental” or “introduction” in their titles, suggesting that these courses may be foundational or introductory courses in the Communication major. Since the existing pathway includes only three courses and lacks a common introductory course, this information suggests additional opportunities to strengthen the Communication pathway by clarifying the learning outcomes of foundational courses.

**Building MiTransfer Pathways**

In MiTransfer Pathways, students complete an associate degree at a participating community college that includes the MTA and selected MiTransfer Pathways courses that will apply to a program of study. Once students earn the associate degree, they can transfer to a participating university to complete the remaining bachelor’s degree requirements.

1. Conduct catalog research to identify common lower-division courses as potential candidates for pathway courses. These candidates should be courses that are either required, recommended, optional, or appropriate for students wishing to major in the discipline to complete in the first and second years at the community college.

2. Faculty from both two- and four-year institutions then narrow down the candidate courses to a set of three to nine foundational courses in the discipline that can be taught at participating community colleges and will transfer to participating universities.
Recommendations for Institutions

1. Develop systems to understand how students who take foundational courses in Communication flow through your institution. Course equivalency matrices have been created in MiTransfer.org to determine transfer applicability for the Communication courses. How many students who take the foundational courses transfer? Where do they transfer and what are the disaggregated baccalaureate completion rates for these students? Data work should also include qualitative interviews with transfer students.

2. Build relationships with willing transfer partners to strengthen the pathway, including a process to accept and apply a foundational Communication course offered at the community college. Leveraging regional proximity and widening the partnership lens to include private institutions can help thicken relationships between transfer partners and encourage receiving institutions to distinguish themselves by demonstrating their transfer-receptive culture to students.

Discussion and Recommendations: Pathway to a Bachelor’s Degree in Communication and the Role of Communication within Pathways

Strengthening the Pathway to Communication

While three specific Communication courses with broad transfer equivalency are included in the MiTransfer Pathways, many participants in the MiTransfer process were very interested in including an introductory Communication course in the pathway as well. Conversations among faculty during the MiTransfer Pathways meetings highlighted competing viewpoints on design and learning outcomes for a course of this nature. Specifically, some faculty advocated for outcomes related to qualitative and quantitative research while others focused more on introducing careers in the Communication sector. This conflict remained unresolved through the Strengthening MiHumanities project and suggests a key area of opportunity.

The lack of agreement on a transferable introductory Communication course presents a significant barrier to recruiting community college students into the pathway. Even when such a course is offered at the community college, uncertainty about transferability creates hesitancy among advisors who know that some universities may require students to repeat this introductory course as juniors. A transferable introductory course could provide a viable entry point into the major while offering “light the fire” experiences for potential Communication students.

Recommendations for Institutions

1. Develop systems to understand how students who take foundational courses in Communication flow through your institution. Course equivalency matrices have been created in MiTransfer.org to determine transfer applicability for the Communication courses. How many students who take the foundational courses transfer? Where do they transfer and what are the disaggregated baccalaureate completion rates for these students? Data work should also include qualitative interviews with transfer students.

2. Build relationships with willing transfer partners to strengthen the pathway, including a process to accept and apply a foundational Communication course offered at the community college. Leveraging regional proximity and widening the partnership lens to include private institutions can help thicken relationships between transfer partners and encourage receiving institutions to distinguish themselves by demonstrating their transfer-receptive culture to students.
3. Leverage faculty participation in associations such as the National Communication Association to build toward shared understanding and agreement among faculty of the core components and learning outcomes of the foundational courses in Communication. Frame conversations about the challenges transfer students face through an equity lens, and work to center student interests in these disciplinary settings.

**Strengthening Communication in the Pathways**

Communication is widely regarded as one of the power skills that should be embedded in every credential pathway. Because these courses build capacity for presentation skills, creative collaboration, and problem-solving, Communication faculty believe that more of their courses could be effectively embedded in a wide range of programs to help “light the fire” and keep students engaged. Institutions must find ways to build the profile of Communication courses as vital building blocks of pathways inside and outside of the humanities. Strategies might include promoting faculty collaboration across disciplines to find natural synergies and exploring the viability of tailoring Communication courses for a variety of broad fields of study or career clusters.

**Recommendations for Institutions**

1. Determine the proportion of students who transfer who complete Communication courses for the MTA, whether as one of the options for the Communication requirement or to fulfill a requirement in humanities.

2. Explore the persistence and completion rates for community college students who take both foundational and specialty Communication courses. Conduct qualitative research and interview students to learn more about the potential of Communication courses to ignite greater interest in learning for students within a wider range of pathways.

3. Ask faculty who teach Communication courses to describe how the learning outcomes in their courses contribute to more densely populated pathways. Create conditions for Communication faculty to persuade faculty teaching in other programs to include these courses as recommended electives for students in a wider range of disciplines.

**About Strengthening MiHumanities**

Strengthening MiHumanities is a collaborative effort between the Michigan Center for Student Success and the Community College Research Center focused on strengthening transfer pathways in the humanities and on strengthening the humanities in program pathways. Funding for this work is generously provided by the Mellon Foundation. For more information about the project, including the roadmaps for Communication, English, History, and Theater, visit https://www.mcca.org/Strengthening-MiHumanities.