STRENGTHENING MI HUMANITIES ROADMAPS

Strengthening Pathways in the Humanities and Strengthening the Humanities in Pathways

Michigan Community College Association
The humanities play a critical role in higher education, holding up a mirror to human experience and illuminating the complexity of our world and relationships. The humanities are essential to the development of the power skills required for effectively navigating today’s world. In the Strengthening MiHumanities initiative, researchers from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) partnered with the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) for a two-year project to explore the landscape of the humanities in Michigan’s community colleges and develop roadmaps to build or strengthen pathways in each of the four selected disciplines of Communication, English, History, and Theater.

The initiative leveraged significant state investments to improve transfer in Michigan, including the Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA), the MiTransfer Pathways, and the Michigan Transfer Network portal at MiTransfer.org. The Strengthening MiHumanities project team has outlined crucial next steps for state leadership and institutions to build new pathways for students who begin their postsecondary education at one of Michigan’s community and tribal colleges and to ensure equitable access to the benefits of a humanities education for all Michigan students. The recommendations here and in the individual roadmaps for each discipline were created from data analysis by CCRC and insights from over 100 faculty and administrators from Michigan’s public and private two- and four-year institutions.

The focal disciplines for Strengthening MiHumanities were selected in consultation with the funder and include one of the MiTransfer Pathways programs (Communication) and two humanities areas with relatively high enrollments (English and History). Theater was selected to include a performance discipline. As originally conceived, these roadmaps would include recommendations for core courses and electives in the disciplines, and they would provide guidance for general education requirements to help students stay on the path to an associate degree and successfully transition to a bachelor’s degree in these majors.

The project team entered the work with the assumption that poorly or inadequately defined program pathways were the problem to solve. Faculty conversations, however, revealed that the challenges—and thus the opportunities—are not quite as clear cut as simply selecting foundational courses to build clear transfer pathways to a baccalaureate in key humanities programs.

The team also approached the work knowing that time and space for in-depth exploration of student experiences in these disciplines would provide a rich opportunity for faculty to work collaboratively. Faculty greatly value the opportunity to collaborate with peers and partners from other institutions to refresh pedagogy, modernize course content, and provide stronger transfer bridges between two- and four-year institutions. Including peer-to-peer dialogue in the design of sessions with participating institutions produced rich insights gleaned from faculty exploration of strategies to strengthen the humanities in pathways and to strengthen pathways in the humanities.
In 2019, CCRC found that grades in humanities and liberal arts courses at community colleges are a strong predictor of transfer to a four-year college and baccalaureate completion. These findings suggest that institutional leaders must give attention to the ways that humanities courses promote students’ sense of purpose and efficacy as college students regardless of their interest in pursuing a degree in the humanities. Rather than focusing exclusively on the work of building discrete pathways in humanities fields, faculty dialogues in Michigan suggested that the work should also focus on strengthening humanities courses in a wide range of pathways.

Given the limited time and resources available to community college humanities faculty, there is real promise in the work of leveraging disciplinary networks and regional collaborations to stretch resources, smooth pathways, and communicate the value of the humanities widely. The sheer complexity and diversity of challenges facing different disciplines in the humanities suggest discipline-specific efforts are also necessary. The roadmaps that accompany this paper illustrate both the complexity of the picture and the promise of faculty-led efforts within different disciplines.

**Recommendations to MCCA, MASU, and the Transfer Steering Committee**

While the discipline-specific roadmaps are designed to be immediately useful for institutions, this report also highlights recommendations to the MCCA and its partner organizations: the Michigan Association of State Universities (MASU), the Michigan Independent Colleges and Universities (MICU), and the Transfer Steering Committee (TSC) which oversees the Michigan Transfer Agreement and the MiTransfer Pathways. Associations and the TSC could provide leadership in strengthening the role of humanities disciplines at both public and private institutions across Michigan in several ways.

**Refresh the MTA**

Ten years out, an overall review of the MTA is in order. The TSC should follow the data to explore opportunities for improvements and set a cadence and process for refreshing the agreement that includes the type of faculty dialogues and data work carried out in this project. The discipline-specific examples below illustrate the kinds of challenges that can only be addressed through review and updates to the MTA. Based on the findings from the Strengthening MiHumanities initiative, the roles of courses in Communication and Composition courses should receive special attention in this review.
**Communication**

Twenty-three community colleges and twenty universities currently participate in a MiTransfer Pathways agreement in Communication.

a) A pending overall evaluation of the ten MiTransfer Pathways should include a review of the number of community college students who take Communication courses in the pathway before transfer, the number of transfer students who register for Communication courses after transfer, and the number of community college students who ultimately complete bachelor’s degrees in Communication.

b) Insights from the *Strengthening MiHumanities* faculty dialogues suggest that adding an introductory Communication course in this pathway would make it easier to recruit students into the Communication major. The TSC Committee should provide leadership in convening a faculty group to explore opportunities to develop learning outcomes for an introductory course that would transfer to all participating institutions. Resources from the National Communication Association’s *Learning Outcomes in Communication Project* should inform faculty efforts to strengthen the pathway for Michigan community college students wishing to pursue a degree in Communication after transfer.

**English**

Because foundational Composition courses are embedded in every program of study, the *Strengthening MiHumanities* faculty conversations focused on the importance of establishing common learning outcomes across the state to ensure seamless transfer and applicability of the series of lower-division Composition courses to satisfy general education requirements. The TSC should provide leadership by convening a faculty group to study learning outcomes in first-year Composition courses for both four-year and two-year institutions and develop an understanding of any variation in how Composition I and II are accepted and applied in transfer. This faculty group should recommend a set of statewide learning outcomes for Composition I and II to ease concerns about transferability regardless of credit hour discrepancies.

**History**

The conversations with History faculty suggested the need to elevate the profile of History and the importance of studying History as a component of general education and a wide range of programs. In our complex Information Age, historical knowledge and historical ways of thinking are increasingly important in every discipline. Whether through majoring in History or taking History courses as a component of a different field of study, today’s learners would benefit from studying in the discipline. Two opportunities exist for building a major pathway in History.
a) History appears to be a comparatively easy discipline in which to build a traditional transfer pathway because of the relatively standard and generally linear way foundational courses in the discipline are organized. The TSC should provide leadership in the process of creating a new MiTransfer Pathways agreement in History, beginning by convening faculty from interested two- and four-year institutions to ensure that the foundational courses in the discipline can transfer and be applied across multiple institutions. Insights from the American Historical Association (AHA)'s Tuning the History Discipline project should undergird and accelerate the work of building a History pathway. Setting common boundaries for time periods across institutional contexts can be accelerated by leveraging the work accomplished through the Tuning the History Discipline project.

b) A common criticism of introductory college courses that survey historical periods is that the content does not appear to be sufficiently differentiated from high school History courses. To remedy this and better integrate historical studies into a wider range of disciplines, the TSC should convene a faculty group to review the design, delivery, and intended outcomes of foundational History courses. Insights from the AHA's History Gateways project can provide guidance to help faculty rethink foundational History courses within the context of a transferable History core.

**Theater**

The decision to label foundational acting and performance courses as “studio” courses and exclude them from the MTA ultimately ignores the critical thinking and communication components of these courses that could benefit students in multiple program pathways. This omission could be remedied either by amending the MTA to include studio courses OR by removing foundational acting and performance classes from the studio category. The TSC should provide leadership in revisiting the conversation about studio courses in the MTA, particularly foundational Theater courses.

**Conclusion**

A report commissioned by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2013) describes the importance of the humanities:

> As we strive to create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common. The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities—including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts—foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds. (p. 9)
As Michigan colleges and universities engage in the ongoing, difficult work of creating seamless transfer pathways for Michiganders, the humanities will continue to be vitally important. Through efforts to create pathways in the humanities and to strengthen the role of the humanities in all pathways, Michigan institutions can lead the way in building an educated citizenry and workforce capable of tackling the complex problems we face today as a state, nation, and global society.

**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.*