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 build 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.

For the Theater deep dive, representatives from seven community colleges and four bachelor’s degree-granting institutions participated in discussions of the discipline. Course-taking data indicate that, during the ten years between 2009 and 2019, students at Michigan’s community colleges enrolled in a total of 213 different Theater courses across a spectrum of acting, stagecraft, and dramaturgy at nineteen of the state’s twenty-eight public community colleges. Approximately 23% of the 12,202 students taking Theater courses enrolled in acting courses, with 72% enrolling in Acting I or a similar introductory course. After transferring to a bachelor’s degree-granting institution, 8,516 community college transfer students enrolled in one or more additional Theater courses. Theater representatives in the MiHumanities dialogues identified Acting courses, specifically the introductory course in the series typically titled Acting I, as a focal point for their discussions over the length of the project.
**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.

3. Once faculty identify the set of common courses, institutions begin a process to ensure that all of the MiTransfer Pathways courses transfer as direct equivalents (e.g., PSY 101 = PSYCH 111) instead of as general, departmental, or elective credit (e.g., PSY 101 = PSYCH GEN). The equivalent courses are then recorded in a course equivalency database at MiTransfer.org.

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

**Building a Pathway to Theater**

When building transfer pathways, partners in the two and four-year sectors tend to focus on efficiency and avoiding duplication of courses. However, given the craft component of Theater, there may be disciplinary factors that make it more difficult to build a Theater pathway that eliminates excess credits. For example, when exploring student course-taking patterns in Theater, faculty participants raised questions about whether students may choose to retake acting courses after transfer because of craft-related aspects of the discipline. Nonetheless, for community college students who are interested in achieving at least a bachelor’s degree in Theater, there is much that can be done to smooth the pathway.
Recommendations for Institutions

1. Develop systems to track students who take multiple Theater courses. Analyzing the credit accumulation and completion patterns taken by students interested in Theater before and after transferring can help determine the viability of streamlining the Theater pathway. Course equivalency matrices can be created in MiTransfer.org to determine transfer applicability for Theater courses taken at a community college. Data work should also include qualitative interviews with transfer students to better understand course-taking patterns before and after transfer.

2. Participate in or build regional and local collaborations aimed at establishing a strong and seamless Theater pathway informed by the expertise of faculty at both sending and receiving institutions. Create the conditions for faculty at two- and four-year public and private institutions to establish common outcomes for acting and performance courses to ensure students will have their initial acting courses applied and have immediate access to more advanced courses in the discipline upon transfer.

Building Theater into the Pathways

Theater as a discipline represents a wide range of domains of learning and activity, and these disparate elements are not well understood outside of the discipline. Where many people outside of Theater may view the discipline as an extension of literature studies, most Theater faculty view the field as one that is primarily about performance. When the MTA was signed in 2014, the agreement specifically excluded studio courses, and performance-focused courses were included under the studio umbrella. Because of the central role that acting courses play in Theater, labeling these as studio courses was particularly problematic for Theater faculty. Faculty in Theater view the exclusion of studio courses as a fundamental flaw of the MTA that has created additional barriers for transfer students.

Theater faculty mostly agree that the foundational acting courses in the discipline are extremely valuable to any program of study because of the power skills they build in students. Faculty describe foundational acting courses as prime examples of courses that “light the fire” for students because of the way in which students engage with material, practice application of concepts, and learn more about themselves through these courses.

Foundational Theater courses build human communication, presentation skills, creative collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Therefore, these courses could be powerfully embedded within other pathways inside and outside of the humanities.

For these reasons, as well as because of the shortage of Theater faculty available for dedicated pathways work, Theater may not be statewide transfer pathway. Instead, intentionally infusing Theater courses into a wider range of pathways is likely more promising.
Recommendations for Institutions

1. Work internally to raise the profile of foundational courses in Theater, especially Acting courses, as “light the fire” courses that meaningfully contribute to students’ early sense of purpose. Build these courses into a wider range of program maps as a recommended first-semester elective.

2. Consider ways to revise course objectives in foundational courses to better align with outcomes in humanities courses included in the MTA. For example, supplement scene study and performance with reflective and analytical writing assignments and assessments that emphasize the critical thinking components of the course.

3) Leverage regional faculty work on pathways and association connections to explore outcome alignment among courses and to build a dense network of faculty collaborators across sectors. Frame conversations about the challenges transfer students face through an equity lens, and work to center student interests in these disciplinary settings.

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.