What are student sentiments about the humanities?  
(Survey results complementing WE1S big-data research)

Though the four terms humanities, liberal arts, the arts, and literature might seem closely related, each has a different resonance for students.¹ A survey of 124 undergraduates at UC Santa Barbara, conducted as part of the WE1S project’s human subjects research in spring quarter 2019, asked students to describe the connotations of each term by selecting from the following options: Positive, Negative, Prestigious, Accessible/Inclusive, Fun, Boring, Easy, or Difficult.²

The results show that students rank all four terms more positively than negatively. Humanities received 54 votes for Positive and 18 for Negative. For the arts and literature, the ratios were 50:18 and 41:18, while the gap was narrower for liberal arts at 42:24. Literature is by far the most Prestigious, receiving 31 votes. The arts, liberal arts, and humanities follow with 20, 10, and 7 votes.

However, rankings for Accessible/Inclusive are the exact inverse. Here humanities ranks first with 40 responses, followed by liberal arts (38), the arts (29), and literature (20). In regard to Fun and Boring, the arts are clearly the most fun, receiving 53 votes, high above liberal arts (35), humanities (30), and literature (14). By contrast, literature wins the race for boring with 42 votes. Trailing far behind in boredom are humanities (16), liberal arts (13), and the arts. In addition, literature is Difficult according to 40 students. Much less so are the arts (16), humanities (12), and liberal arts (10). Inversely, humanities ranks as most Easy with 44 votes. Liberal arts ranks second at 42, with the arts trailing at 34 and literature at 13.

These results indicate that the humanities and liberal arts are similar in the student imagination. Both are Easy and Accessible/Inclusive. The arts differentiate themselves as much more Fun but less Accessible/Inclusive. Literature is the greatest outlier, manifesting as the most Difficult, Boring, and Prestigious among the four terms we report on here.

These direct, if small-scale, results gathered from students can be placed in conversation with WE1S’s study of large-scale (but “distantly read”) collections of public discourse because humanities, liberal arts, the arts and literature were all used by WE1S as search keywords to build its collections.

¹ In a U.S context, the arts means the creative and performing arts, not the more capacious sense of the humanities and social sciences in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth nations. (See WE1S study of cross-national usage of humanities vs. the arts.)
² Students could check as many answers as applied, and not all participants responded. A follow-up question allowed participants to explain their answers narratively. Some students explained that they responded with socially prevalent views (sometimes in comparison to views of the sciences) that were not necessarily their own. Others commented on the vocabulary our survey used, emphasized the importance of context, or cited personal experiences.