

The humanities help us to find the "meaning of life"; but such discourse belongs primarily to students in private institutions and doctoral universities.

We often think of the humanities as a key site for reckoning with some of life's biggest questions--from what it means to be human to how to find value in our lives. One of the most important topics (#94) in a 100-topic [model](#) of WE1S's [Collection 14](#) (21,182 unique articles mentioning "humanities" or "liberal arts" from higher-ed student newspapers) demonstrates that what might be called the "Meaning of Life" is indeed a vibrant aspect of college student discourse around the humanities and liberal arts. Topic 94 has the fourth highest weight in this model at 3.6% of the corpus. But the correspondence between this topic and the sources that most contribute to it reveals that such discussion may not be evenly distributed. Campus newspapers from private institutions and doctoral universities are much more likely to contribute to the topic than newspapers from public institutions, liberal arts colleges, or community colleges.

Keywords in Topic 94 include: *world, human, humanities, culture, understanding, ways, social, new, different, understand, society, ideas, life, knowledge, study, and questions*. Articles associated with the topic offer overwhelmingly positive accounts of the value of the humanities in descriptions of campus events and opinion pieces defending humanities education. Sample titles include: "Narratives of Capitalism: Reading and Writing the Future of the Global Economy", "'Origins' explores what it means to be human," and "Lecturer links posterity, sustainability and liberal arts." As one student puts it, "The humanities gave me my life." Many articles focus particularly on interdisciplinary contexts. In the words of another student, "You cannot fully understand and appreciate science without looking at the humanities" (articles a-e).

However, our model shows that the "Meaning of Life" may not be an equally accessible discourse to students at all colleges. In Collection 14 overall the ratio of articles sourced from private institutions to those from public ones is 0.77 to 1, and the ratio of doctoral universities to liberal arts colleges to community colleges is 14 to 10 to 10. Private institutions account for 43% of the corpus, and doctoral universities for 64%. But if we examine the most significant documents associated with Topic 94, we see these ratios skew steeply toward the private and doctoral ends of the scale. In the top 100 articles associated with the topic, the ratio of those sourced from private to public institutions is 1.5 to 1. Similarly, the ratio of documents from doctoral universities to those from liberal arts colleges to those from community colleges is 25 to 6 to 1. If we extend the sample to the 143 articles that contribute at least 25% of their tokens to Topic 94, we see a ratio of private to public of 1.9 to 1, and of doctoral institutions to liberal arts colleges to community colleges of 28:6:1.¹

These numbers demonstrate that private institutions and doctoral universities are associated with the "Meaning of Life" in much higher proportions.

Document Collection Studied: [C-14 \(start page\)](#)
Topic model of this collection: [C-14.100](#) (100 topics)
Interesting sample topics: [#94](#)
Articles cited (in order): [a](#), [b](#), [c](#), [d](#), [e](#)
Evidentiary documentation for this finding: Lab-8 research notes

¹ Calculations discard two near duplicates among the top articles, both from Stanford. The tag categories of "private" and "doctoral" do overlap. These metrics are made possible by work from Lindsay Thomas, Scott Kleinman, Jeremy Douglass, Helen Foley, Francesca Battista, and other WE1S members.