

U. Miami Undergraduate Survey: Humanities Contexts/Opinions

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In this report, we analyze two questions (QU32, Q179) that asked undergraduates about the contexts in which they hear about the humanities and their opinions of the humanities.

I: Visualizations and Statistics

QU32: In what context(s) do you hear the word “humanities” used? (Please check all that apply.)

Total Respondents: 243 out of 312

At school: 73%

At home: 13%

At work: 9%

In books or in the media: 48%

I never hear this term used: 2%

Other: 1%

No answer: 22%

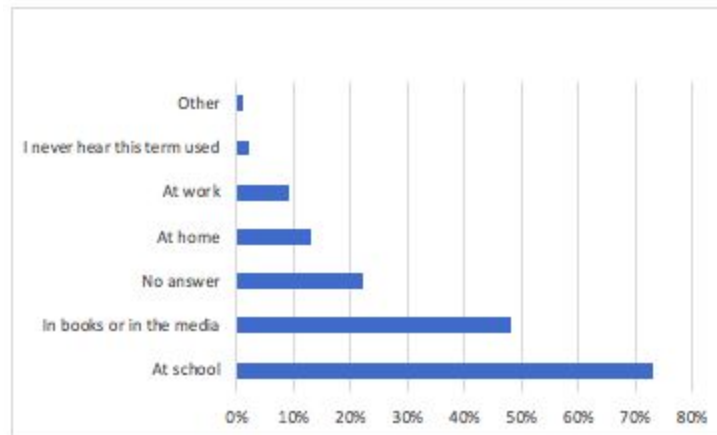


Fig. 1: QU32 results

Q179: How would you describe your overall impression of the humanities? (Select all that apply.)

Total Respondents: 242 out of 312

- Positive: 44%
- Fun: 40%
- Useful: 38%
- Easy: 28%
- Accessible: 21%
- Boring: 14%
- Prestigious: 14%
- Difficult: 10%
- Useless: 9%
- Negative: 2%
- Other: 5%
- No answer: 22%

Those who selected "Other" added their own terms. Some answers were shorter, such as "vague," "important", "Not well versed in the term," "Social change," "indifferent," "Free, loose, flexible," "Creative," "unknown," "interesting," "Critical thinking," "Pretentious in some cases," and "different." Other answers were more discursive: "For someone that comes from a family that is not as well off, a major like this seems like a waste as it does not provide access to increased financial gains," "some are useful, some are useless," and "Some aspects are boring and others are interesting to me. The humanities encompasses such a vast amount of disciplines so there is something for everyone to enjoy."

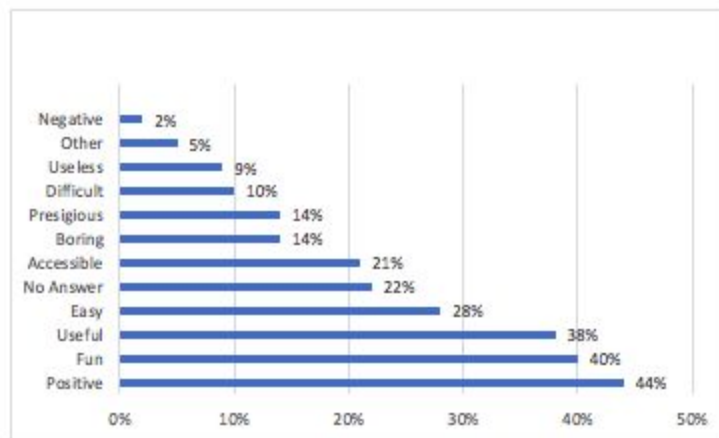


Fig. 2: Q179 results

II: Observations

One of the most interesting findings from Q179 is the relationship between the rankings of “useful,” “useless,” and “prestigious.” “Useful” is the 3rd-most chosen word, selected by almost 38% of respondents, while “useless” was selected by only 9% of respondents. “Prestigious,” however, was chosen by only 14% of respondents (the same number as “Boring”). The disconnect between “useful” and “prestigious” is curious, given that many people connect the hard sciences with prestige specifically because of their high use value with respect to topics like global climate change and infectious disease. It seems there is a mismatch between the concepts “prestigious” and “useful” in relation to the humanities. Since the majority of respondents have heard of the humanities through school (73%) or the media (48%), it is worth it to consider whether either of these sources might be the cause of this disjunction.

Other high-ranking adjectives might shed further light on this disparity. The top two most-chosen words, “positive” and “fun,” hint at the possibility that the humanities’ use value might be defined differently than that of the sciences. Perhaps the value of the humanities is perceived more via engaging learning experiences or enjoyable extracurricular activities than in tangible products. While respondents count these experiences as highly “useful” in their lives, the low rate of selection of “prestigious” indicates that they recognize there is a larger narrative and pattern of thinking about the humanities that does not align with their personal experiences.

Lastly, however, the combination of the results of Q179 with the results of QU32 calls into question what students might have in mind when they rank adjectives about the humanities. Because they predominantly hear the word “humanities” only in school-related and media-related contexts and not in more personal, everyday contexts like home or work, they might have a wide variety of ideas about what “humanities” means in the first place. Many of them might imagine the humanities rather narrowly, as a specific subset of academic courses, many of which are graduation requirements at the secondary and post-secondary level.