

## U. Miami Focus Groups: Effects of Teachers and Institutions on Perceptions of the Humanities

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*In this report, we have collected quotes from our focus group transcripts which center around the effect of teachers and institutions upon perceptions of the humanities. Focus Group 1 and 2 respondents are non-undergraduates. Focus Group 3 respondents are undergraduates.*

Focus Group	Name	Field	Status
1	H	Marine Biology	PhD Candidate
1	E	Developmental Psychology	PhD Candidate
1	B	Meteorology	Professor
1	S	English	Lecturer
2	D	Academic Services	Associate Dean
2	A	Oceanography	PhD Student
2	G	English	PhD Candidate
2	C	Sustainable Business	MA Student
2	R	Accounting	MA Student
3	N	English	Sophomore
3	P	Political Science	Senior
3	L	Public Health	Freshman
3	U	Motion Pictures	Junior
3	T	Music Business	Freshman

**I: Effects of Teachers****Focus Group 1:**

Not discussed in this focus group.

**Focus Group 2:**

C: When I think of anyone in the humanities I always think of men, you know. I hardly ever think of, and couldn't tell you a book that I've read in any of my studies that was by a woman. My teachers were men, and most of the books - I can't remember a book that was not, um, the lead author was not a male. So kind of even though the industry may be more female...they're just not given the same space.

G: I went to a high school that I felt like prepared me really well for college, and I had really great English teachers, and so I thought my primary major, I would like to do this, maybe be a high school English teacher. But then I realized that the School of Ed. wasn't really what I wanted to do for a back-up major, so I switched into German instead. I think I was maybe too quick to choose my major, and I often wish that I had experimented a little more in college and taken some classes outside my comfort zone, like a statistics class, or a business class, or something like that, or geology class.

G: I had really good teachers when I was in high school, and I saw them making a tangible difference in people's lives, right, encouraging students not to drop out, uh, pushing students to do work beyond the syllabus, and to push themselves and to do their best, even if it was, you know, beyond what was required of them, and having teachers that were such positive forces in the world that I could see an immediate impact on people's lives, made me want to do that same thing and have that kind of gratification of making people's lives better by showing them that they were capable of a lot more than they thought they were. So that's a huge part of why I went into what eventually became this career.

D: [I saw] how demanding they were, and...I think that prepared me, um, just for life, the stress of working with people, and working in, on the systems, and meeting deadlines, and understanding parties, urgencies, and also - professionalism...The human element part about the education, I think, those teachers sharing and going out of their way to help us learn, that made it more worthwhile than anything else, whether--even if I was studying art, or whatever it could be, I think...they did all they could to help us, that makes the best difference.

**Focus Group 3:**

S: I was really good at calculus and as soon as I decided that I wanted to come to the University of Miami for Frost and to major in music business, [my calculus teacher] looked at me like I was kind of letting the world down. And then I went back home in October over Fall Break to visit my high school and talk to the professor, or talk to the teachers, there and talk to the current high school students about the University of Miami and he said, "So are you still uh doing that music thing? How's that working out for you?" And it was really condescending and I thought like why - well not why because I kind of understand why we think that STEM is the most important thing because I feel like it has a very, very clear tie to... our economic system in the United States so obviously people are going to push you to do more stuff like that because it has a very clear link to high income jobs like becoming a doctor and stuff like that. But I feel like it's silly that we haven't broken out of that mold yet. That we're in the twenty-first century and people still think like that.

N: I actually really like calculus. I just don't want to use it for my career...I think like that would be the preconceived notion, because I am good in this skill, I should do it. And it was more of just me saying like what do I like, what do I want to do with my life and how am I going to get there? And what's like going to bring me this joy? And English was a function of that. So I think people definitely project things onto you based off—it could be positive or negative but they might see that you have this certain skill and they'll like project this thing onto you really out of goodwill, like they want something good for you, but they'll just like, that's, a lot of time people don't know there are other options so that's something I dealt with in high school.

P: My AP world history teacher, he was so quirky and funny and he really opened dialogue for me and like my best friend to argue every single class over history and policy, that I just fell in love with political science and humanities.

L: I was homeschooled for more than half of my life and for all of my middle school years I participated in this co-op where a bunch of homeschooled kids would come together and it was based off a classical education model. It was really nice, because we developed such an appreciation of the arts, we learned Latin, that was a really big thing. We had to learn so much Latin, we would all like, there was art every single week, there was so much emphasis on developing your public speaking skills, there was like learning about the greats like Archimedes and Plato, just thinking about thought like the Socratic method, like all that stuff, I felt very lucky in that way because that was the basis for my elementary and middle school years.

**II: Effect of Institutions****Focus Group 1:**

E: I did go to a liberal arts college, but I also feel I was part of the group that came into a liberal arts education kind with like a set path in mind, and actually my liberal arts experience changed my path...It doesn't necessarily mean like, if I major in this then I will be ... pursuing that career afterward, but that experience will help me get there.

S: I went to a liberal arts college as well. It's a way of thinking, it's curiosity, it's...learning respect for all of this different disciplines and what they have to offer, and it's a way of looking at them. Inquisitive, um, questioning. And also respecting all of the things that we have gone before and their ideas.

**Focus Group 2:**

R: [In China] we have to choose ...to be a science student or humanities student in the freshman year of high school...but I don't think we really can know what we really want at that age...there's a tendency, I think it's, it's not good tendency, um, like some science students despise humanities students because they think that you're not smart, you're not good, math...that's why you choose humanities major.

R: I used to want to be a science student, but in the freshman year of my high school I found myself not interested in chemistry or biology at all. So, I chose humanities. But after that, um, I feel the students I met, like, my classmates, they are more, like, they care more about this world, and also the social relationships...I feel like science students usually care more about their, like, their science concepts...After I became a humanities student, I- I feel that- I learned a lot more from my classmates.

A: I did a program in high school where I did my senior year at a community college so I could take, like, other biology classes...I'm so thankful for that every day because I know there are so many other people who, who are still kind of, like, struggling to figure out what they want to do.

D: Under President Shalala, she used to say, you know, it's okay to be undecided, coming in, not knowing exactly what you want to do. I thought that was amazing because to hear someone of her stature and her experience say that... and to talk about her experience when she went to college...she would just, I think, kinda calm the anxiety of some people, that they weren't sure...and I think that messaging from the leadership of the university or the institution is really important, um, to a lot of students 'cause a lot of students struggle with, you know, really, how they wanna complete their career, [their] educational journey, so to speak, in undergrad. So when you have a president come down and say, hey, it's, it's all right, you know, to, to not know, it's all right to, you know, change your mind and think about, think this out, 'cause it's important. It's important that you have a good experience but also that you learn what you think you wanna

learn. So I, I always thought her messaging on that was so important, and I thought it, it really made this place great to have someone, again, the president of the university say that.

### Focus Group 3:

T: When I was in high school I also did IB and because IB is so — they have a push on being interdisciplinary but at least in my high school program there was a really big push on um, the hard sciences and math and different levels of um, those things, so, a lot of people from my high school — I was one of two people who majored in music. Um, out of like, out of our entire senior graduating class.

P: My high school was weeding out the arts and humanities and putting in their place STEM programs because that's what would get them the recognition in the county and it would get them the good funding and all of that.

L: Our Dean of Education and senior vice provost, Dr. Green, he's the biggest champion of interdisciplinary studies. Like I remember at orientation, he went on, he was like be the kid who double majors in physics and classics, be the kid who takes classes just for fun, so I think we're lucky that we have someone who's the voice for our curriculum, it encourages us, like I feel that climate, I feel like my advisor wouldn't look at me crazy if I wanted to, you know, choose a major in something totally different. Those are the kids who are highlighted, those are the kids who are spotlighted, and people who decide to explore an interdisciplinary path are made into heroes.

M: When I went to the 'Canes kickoff, President Frenk was talking about how a lot of students start here with one major and what they graduate is something completely different. And they really like encourage you to just go crazy, which I really like that about that here, like they encourage you, like oh you like this, let's take more classes here to see if you really like that, okay you want to do this, let's add a bit—it's like very welcoming.”

P: I thought it was looked down on.

N: The people that I've met in the past two years are like huge resources...So one of the things for me in terms of going to college and staying the whole time was those experiences and those resources and those people I wouldn't get if I was just like...get this degree and go.

**III: Observations****Effects of teachers:**

Respondents reported that teachers positively influenced and helped shape their worldviews, curiosity, and academic achievements. But teachers also projected personal biases, often out of goodwill and a place of care, against students' best interests. In the cases of our participants, all of them stuck to their personal interests nonetheless.

**Effects of institutions:**

High school is when career planning and academic commitment begin to take form, and one of the first places where students are exposed to larger societal structures via internships and school programs.

The concept that the sciences and humanities are at odds with one another begins to take shape through institutional influence, the influence of teachers, and in conversations among the student body. Institutional influence, at least in this case, seems to be a lot more powerful than that of teachers, as we saw via undergraduates saying they felt encouraged by upper administration to explore other majors. None of the participants made big changes to their academic plans because of their college instructors' suggestions, but the institutional environment seems to have a greater impact on students' learning environment and perceptions of different fields of knowledge and professions.