

## U. Miami Focus Groups: Perceptions

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*This report features quotes from our three focus group transcripts which reflect participants' differing perspectives on science, the humanities, and the liberal arts as well as their choice of major. Focus Group 1 and 2 respondents comprise non-undergraduates. Focus Group 3 comprises 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. Participant Stereotypes Based on Majors

### Focus Group 1

*Observation: Respondents have diverse perceptions of themselves and others based on the choice of major.*

**E:** I get the, oh you're a psychology student, are you analyzing me?

**E:** Um... I mean to me [the sciences] are all one thing, I do not distinguish between soft vs. hard, but I feel like society distinguishes it, and you know feels like Psychology I think people perceive it kind of similar to what we read, it's like being easier, kind of field. The soft science...

**H:** And I mean like I said, it's hard like I was in the science field, I don't know what my friends were doing, I will say like, you know I'm a little older now, I'm a little wiser. But you know at the time it was I always seemed to have way more work to do than they did. Like so much more to do and I had to study so much more for my tests than they did. And like I said, at the time I was a little bitter about it.

**S:** If someone says to me what are you doing and I say I teach composition, oh, that's okay. But if I say I teach technical and scientific writing it's like, oh that's complicated. Well, so is composition. But, um, it's all in how you couch it. If you say, you know...I am a humanities major, god knows what you are doing, but if I say I am a psychology major, oh you have a definite plan and you are going to have certain outcomes. So I think it's societal assumptions of when you say a certain area or a certain major, that therefore I can compartmentalize you into certain activities, or the way you think or the way you approach things, and it shouldn't be that way.

**H:** ...a lot of my friends were in the humanities, and they had to take biology as well as part of their gen-eds but they took—there was a separate class, it was biology for non-science majors. I don't how that class was different, I don't really understand why there is a different class. I never sat in on that class, but to me it was a little ridiculous, it's like, I take the same English class that you do but why are you taking a different biology class, and I think that definitely feeds in to that stereotype or that idea of science is too hard so we need a different science class for them, and I think that's absurd.

### Focus Group 2

**D:** Um, again, my example, when I was in school I wanted to be a, I wanted to be a CPA, I wanted to be a tax accountant or maybe be a lawyer, or maybe - whatever, um, and I got to accounting, my major back then was accounting, and it was so boring. And my senior year I was having to finish it, and I was thinking, you know what, I wanna study- I always loved sports, I'm gonna study sports administration, so I got my masters in that, and now I'm working in athletics. So, I tell my story, like, just because you study something doesn't mean you're gonna do it.

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**R:** So, I, well honestly, we, we have to choose our- whether to be a science student or humanities student in the fresh year of high school, so it's like, at age of 15, or 16, but I don't think we, we really can know what we really want at that age, so ... so, what happen most is, is that, um, most family will, uh, ask, ask their students to be in science major because you can have more jobs. I mean, you can have a bigger job range in the future. So, so most people just choose, um, science area, although they are not good at it, maybe, um, and also, 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, mmm physics, chemistry, so you choo-, that's why you choose humanities major.

### Focus Group 3

**M:** I'll be complaining about homework and my friend's like, you're a film major, like, big whoop. And then they're like I'm in Earth systems and this and that. But then also sometimes you have the people who are like, I wish I could have a class that allows me to be so creative, to have that much freedom.

**L:** ...I'll often hear conversations between like friends of mine who are STEM majors and friends who are in the humanities and they'll ask each other their GPA and they'll be like, Oh well you have a 3.8 because you're in film or because you're in communications or this and that. But you have to realize that not everyone has those like those skills that you have, like I wouldn't know how to set up a shot, like I wouldn't know how to plan something out, so, uh, you can go back and forth, you can make the argument that STEM is harder because you have to utilize all these parts of your brain but what about all the millions of the parts of your brain that you use to...to helping them create stuff in the humanities...

**S:** When I was in high school trying to choose a college major, I was, I was taking a calculus class with a very STEM-oriented teacher who thought that math was the only important thing in the world...and 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 he looked at me like I was kind of letting the world down. Like, Oh, I mean, okay, well, good for you. Yeah. 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 what 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.

**L:** I think [taking classes outside your field as part of cognates] keep you humble. Like, I have friends who get As in biochemistry or in o-chem two, and then they'll be like crap, like this anthropology class is really kicking my butt, or like, this intro to archaeology class,

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why do I have this C? And I think it's good, I think it's good for people, for some to be humbled by the type of skills you have to have to be an English and a humanities major, and vice versa, I think it's important for there to be that like give and take respect.

**P:** I get math, so I am able to keep up with my STEM major friends but like, when I tell them like, all the things I have to do versus all the things they have to do, they have to do a lot of math and a lot of lab reports but when I tell them all the papers I have to write and all the like specific details, like foreign policy in the Middle East and in China, they're also like, wow, that's hard. [I] tell them I'm an English major, they're like "Oh what are you going to do, are you going to become a teacher?" So, it's also like — and it's also not like people trying to be insulting, it's like they really don't know, like, the possibilities with an English major so I feel definitely like, me taking that step is like opening up this whole new world of possibilities in terms of like what one can study.

**M:** I kept telling people that I wanted to do the film major. They'd just look, stink eyes again, just what are you doing, and like, as I told my family, this is what I'm really passionate about, this is what I really love, they kind of got more accepting.

**P:** To be fair, like, liberal arts or humanities is one of those underdog majors, they look like, people think that if you get a degree in the arts you're going to be on the side of the road asking for money, but there's so many people out there who make it and do something important and, like, who do make a lot of money. You just don't see it immediately when you study.

## II. Undergrads and Non-Undergrads Value the Humanities Differently

### Focus Group 1

*Observation: Participants acknowledge the difficulty level of the humanities.*

**H:** To me it's sort of a study of how people view the world and like, on how the other things, how their perspectives and their contexts shaped their decisions, and obviously like those things shaped history. So it's sort of like looking at how all the pieces at a particular snapshot in time fit together to create our history. Sort of.

**H:** Difficult to quantify.

**H:** There are certain things like how do you turn what somebody says into a number. It's very difficult and there are ways like on a survey like having rankings but even then when you get to the—I am getting into statistics here...but when you get to statistical methods it's still like, purely in terms of statistics it's like, that's not the best way to do it. And we went back to the issue of is there a level of subjectivity to it, for better or worse, there is. And I think what people don't realize is that in a lot of science there is still a lot of subjective decisions as well, but I think it is a bit more obvious in the humanities that, how do we take, there is some subjective decision in how you take qualitative information and turn it into numbers regardless of what field you are talking about.

Focus Group 3

*Observation: Participants acknowledge the diverse scope of studying humanities subjects.*

**P:** I think humanities helps us connect with people. 'Cause like think about if you study literature, or politics, or music business, there's like that element of human connection, like when you meet a person, say you talk to them about something you really like in African American studies, or something you learn in music or business or music business, it's something that helps you relate or get that connection started so you can continue to talk about something else.

**N:** I think it goes back to like elitism and access. So, there are people who might be in STEM majors or what not, that never saw the humanities as a viable and sustainable career path, because for most people in the world you need a job to be able to live and do all that jazz, and so I feel like because they don't have exposure or access to the fact that humanities can make a good career, like people turn that down. Um, and it goes back to these rich people for years going to these liberal arts colleges and still being able to make a living. Um, a lot of that exposure wasn't left to the rest of society. So I think that's a huge thing because like when people can see that you can get a major in whatever and make it work, then that'll open it up for people to be like, well, maybe I can do what I'm interested in and not like fall on this back up degree. So I think a lot of it has to do with access and exposure that a lot of people are not given. Um, and that could be, on a small scale level like in families, having family members who have done things and then championed those things but it could also be on a wider like society level about who can study what, and go here, and do this, and make it and be successful. Um, and so I feel like and so for me personally, in my experience, that's been huge and realizing that I can have a humanities career, uh because I didn't see that growing up. Because I like I'm not from like a super wealthy background to be just going to some liberal arts college and just doing what I want and making it work. And so I feel like exposure is huge and for this next generation for people to see people who are in humanities fields that can make things work, I think is really big because I feel that will open the door, because when people see things and they'll be able to put that in their own lives, but when they don't have the exposure, like, they probably won't go that route, so.

**N:** Well that's the thing, you could look like anything. Um, like if you study humanities you don't have to stay in the humanities, you can study humanities and go in business, study humanities and go wherever where else, but I think it's just the openness of talking about your experiences, and letting people know that I started here, and I got here, Um, but I didn't have to do this one track mind of doctor, lawyer, and even if I am a doctor or lawyer, like maybe like I studied Asian Studies or something in undergrad or whatever, and it was still useful. So I think those conversations and that openness is huge.

### **III. Sciences Do Something Good for Society and the Humanities Do Something Good for the Individual**

Focus Group 1

**S:** ...Humanities and the liberal arts teach you how to think, more than anything, and I

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think that's a skill anybody uses and needs when they go out looking for a job. I think we put the cart before the horse and you have to like what you are doing and then decide what's it going-- how you are going to benefit from it or what you are going to reap out of it.

**H:** Yes, that was making me think, I think a big issue, at least through my heavily scientific education. Yes, I had certain like gen-eds that I had to do, but still at the end of the day especially as a scientist and someone who works in fisheries which, if you are not familiar, has huge implications on the everyday person, and a lot of the times in talking about things, and even like...so I am the scientist behind-- that tries to simplify, that tries to count how many fish there are and I communicate with someone who is a fishery manager, who are making the decisions and the laws. They do not actually understand like what my work is, but I still need to be able to communicate with them and to the public what I am doing why I am doing it and how I got to the conclusion that I got to, and I think that it something I feel is an incredible lack in my abilities because I was I was taught so much about the science, we were not taught about like science communication which I guess would fall more under the humanities, so I agree I think there is ...there does need to be more formal overlap between a lot of these things because I think at the end of the day, we are all using a lot of it.

**H:** I think the application of it is a bit more nuanced; in science it's very, "oh you learn this equation so you can make a rocket, like it is very a to b, it's very-- and with the humanities, like, for example for my humanities undergraduate requirement I took religious classes, religion studies classes, because I personally think it's how so many people make decisions and view the world, so everyone should learn about it, that's my personal opinion, it's something that's so important to so many people and it is very useful when you are talking to other people and understanding other people, but I think that's more nuanced, it's not as obvious, unless you really sit down and think about it.

### IV. Literature Is More Difficult and More Prestigious than the Humanities in General

#### Focus Group 1

**B:** It seems like conventionalisms to me, somewhat backward-looking I suppose...you know, I don't know the present... there might be different cohort-dependent things here like today's college students I just don't know at all. And the fact that Hank Paulsen in '68 could be an English major and end up on the track he's on, that's not necessarily replicable today, right? And then again I just don't know the boundaries you know, government... So there's the humanities that are about the present world, political science and current affairs and stuff... and then there's what might be more like the arts, which is what I thought English was. And then there's the social sciences including, like, economics, which ends up being quite a mathematical science. So I think I know where the boundaries are in all this, but...you know, stigma in society, these vague generalizations, but we all know what that means but on the other hand does it still mean that? Or is that just a dead trope now, like a virus flu. From a previous era, somebody coughed it up ten years go and it just floats around, ready to infect another mind. Sorry that's where my brain is these days. And then the jargon prestige envy

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down here was a little sorrowful, that "all of my friends know how to use words that I can't use, they know how to use an exclusive secret language and I don't." And that geeky secret language is not that deep and wonderful, I can tell you. [laughter] It's fun at first, yeah, a secret language, and then you realize, then you can toil in that little mind for a lifetime.

### Focus Group 2

**G:** My major was, uh, my primary major was English, and I would say that most of what I studied as an undergrad carried through to grad school, but, uh, it's really diversified, in grad school right now. I don't just study literature in the conventional sense of novels and poetry and plays; I study all kinds of other things as literature as well, uh, and I wish I had taken some classes as an undergrad that explored that...I don't know if they offered them, I can't remember. Uh, but I would say that pretty much the, the methodology has carried straight through - the ways of researching...the analytical ways of looking at things, the, you know, theoretical preparation, Derrida, all of that...

## **V. Respondents Describe Humanities, Liberal Arts and the Arts Positively**

### Focus Group 1

**S:** I dunno, um, my personal experiences have been that, and I think we have to decide what liberal arts are and what humanities really means. You know I started off as a journalism major because I wanted to make sure I make money, and I eventually went straight into English, cause that's what I loved. I have never been without a job and I tell all my students that, who happen to be engineering students who are therefore, hell-bent on making the next bio--discovery. But I think the issue is that you have to do what you really love and like, as opposed to worrying about whether you are gonna have a job or not. And if that's your ultimate goal then I do not know why you are pursuing anything in the first place. If that's what it is. If that's your end goal is to have a job, I think you've got the wrong mindset why you are studying anything. Humanities and the liberal arts teach you how to think, more than anything, and I think that's a skill anybody uses and needs when they go out looking for a job.

**E:** Um...umbrella...like overall I just...I took it as like a well-rounded education. I like, I was-- I had the opportunity to engage in a lot of these disciplines, while also selecting a major within that, so to me liberal arts is a lot of what's already on this board but in addition to the social sciences, really getting at like....really ...teaching students how to really think, and like that thought process and just being a critical thinker through all these different disciplines.

### Focus Group 2

**D:** That's a good point, too, 'cause, you know, raising a child, they seem to be drawn more to the art or music, or to drama. My oldest goes to drama at the school, she, like, wants to learn to play an instrument; she's not so much drawn to math or science, um, so I think, uh, that evolves obviously. You know, I think the pressures and the, and the influences of life, but I think if you look at a child's growth I think they're drawn to this more, the arts and the STEAM than anything else. So...



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### Focus Group 3

**N:** I usually think of people who go to liberal arts schools, I think of really rich, like really wealthy people who are probably going to become like a lawyer or something in the day, and I think someone said foundation, and like they have their liberal arts degree as a foundation to go to law school. That's like the picture in my head.

**L:** Um, at UM I think of cognates. Like that's UM's ways of introducing everyone to the liberal arts, like giving them a shot at the issues with the subjects they're interested in, but trying to sneak in like those written skills, you know oral skills, trying to sneak it in through the cognates.

**P:** To be fair, like, liberal arts or humanities is one of those underdog majors, they look like, people think that if you get a degree in the arts you're going to be on the side of the road asking for money, but there's so many people out there who make it and do something important and like who do make a lot of money, you just don't see it immediately when you study. And then there's people who study business and STEM and just end up making like, very little money. Like I was in a Spanish class last year with a math major and we were talking about what are you going to do after graduation and he's like, I don't know, I'm going to have to get a PhD just to get a job, because there's no jobs out there for me in math.

**L:** Um, I was homeschooled for more than half of my life Um, 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.

**N:** Yeah, like the word humanities, I think maybe senior year of high school—I think I really started to pay attention to that. I think I also looked at the course thing for dual enrollment. But in terms of the concept of humanities, that's always been something I've been surrounded by and loved so I loved like looking at Black poetry and literature and history and all this other stuff, and my mom, like exposed my sister and I to the arts, so humanities was always a concept that I was comfortable with, I just didn't have a word to put to it. Nor did I ever consider like making it a career, until the last couple of years or so.