

U. Miami Undergraduate Survey: Values and Connotations

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In this report, we analyzed a cluster of questions (QU34 and QU35) centered around undergraduates' perceptions of the values and connotations of the arts, the humanities, STEM and the social sciences.

I: Statistics and Visualizations

QU34: How would you define the value or purpose of the following? (Please check all that apply)

QU34-1: A college education

Total Respondents: 240 out of 312

Gives you personal fulfillment/allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 65%

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 60%

Teaches marketable job skills: 57%

Gives you prestige: 48%

Makes you a good person: 19%

No value: 1%

No answer: 23%

QU34-2: The humanities in a college education

Total Respondents: 229 out of 312

Gives you personal fulfillment/allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 54%

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 52%

Teaches marketable job skills: 25%

Makes you a good person: 24%

Gives you prestige: 19%

No value: 2%

No answer: 27%

QU34-3: The arts in a college education

Total Respondents: 230 out of 312

Gives you personal fulfillment/allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 60%

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 43%

Teaches marketable job skills: 22%

Makes you a good person: 17%

Gives you prestige: 16%

No value: 5%

No answer: 26%

QU34-4: The social sciences in a college education

Total Respondents: 230 out of 312

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 57%

Gives you personal fulfillment/allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 54%

Teaches marketable job skills: 40%

Makes you a good person: 23%

Gives you prestige: 21%

No value: 1%

No answer: 26%

QU34-5: STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) in a college education

Total Respondents: 233 out of 312

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 60%

Teaches marketable job skills: 56%

Gives you prestige: 54%

Gives you personal fulfillment/allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 52%

Makes you a good person: 14%

No value: 0%

No answer: 25%

QU34-6: The humanities in a in a high school curriculum

Total Respondents: 231 out of 312

Gives you personal fulfillment/ allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 48%

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 38%

Makes you a good person: 24%

Teaches marketable job skills: 20%

Gives you prestige: 11%

No value: 11%

No answer: 26%

QU34-7: The arts in a high school curriculum

Total Respondents: 229 out of 312

Gives you personal fulfillment/ allows you to follow your passion or explore your interests: 54%

Prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world: 37%

Makes you a good person: 18%

Teaches marketable job skills: 16%

Gives you prestige: 10%

No value: 9%

No answer: 27%

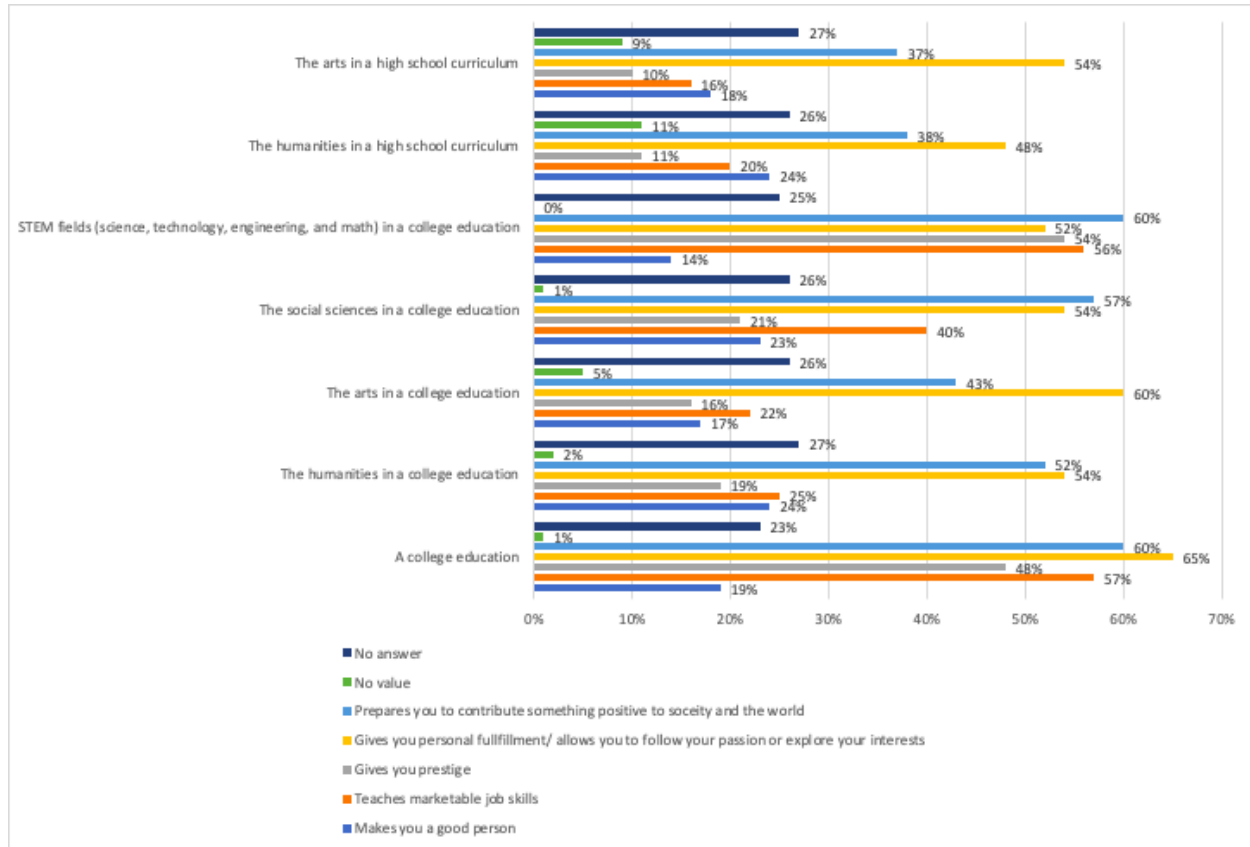


Fig. 1: QU34 results

QU35: How would you describe the connotations of the following terms? (Please check all that apply.)

QU35-1: Humanities

Total Respondents: 231 out of 312

Positive: 50%

Negative: 4%

Prestigious: 14%

Accessible/Inclusive: 34%

Fun: 27%

Easy: 26%

Boring: 12%

Difficult: 8%

No answer: 26%

QU35-2: Liberal Arts

Total Respondents: 225 out of 312

37% Positive
11% Negative
14% Prestigious
33% Accessible/Inclusive
22% Fun
12% Boring
26% Easy
5% Difficult
28% No answer

QU35-3: The Arts

Total Respondents: 227 out of 312

46% Positive
4% Negative
16% Prestigious
27% Accessible/Inclusive
40% Fun
6% Boring
22% Easy
15% Difficult
27% No answer

QU35-4: Literature

Total Respondents: 225 out of 312

40% Positive
6% Negative
28% Prestigious
21% Accessible/Inclusive
16% Fun
27% Boring
9% Easy
25% Difficult
28% No answer

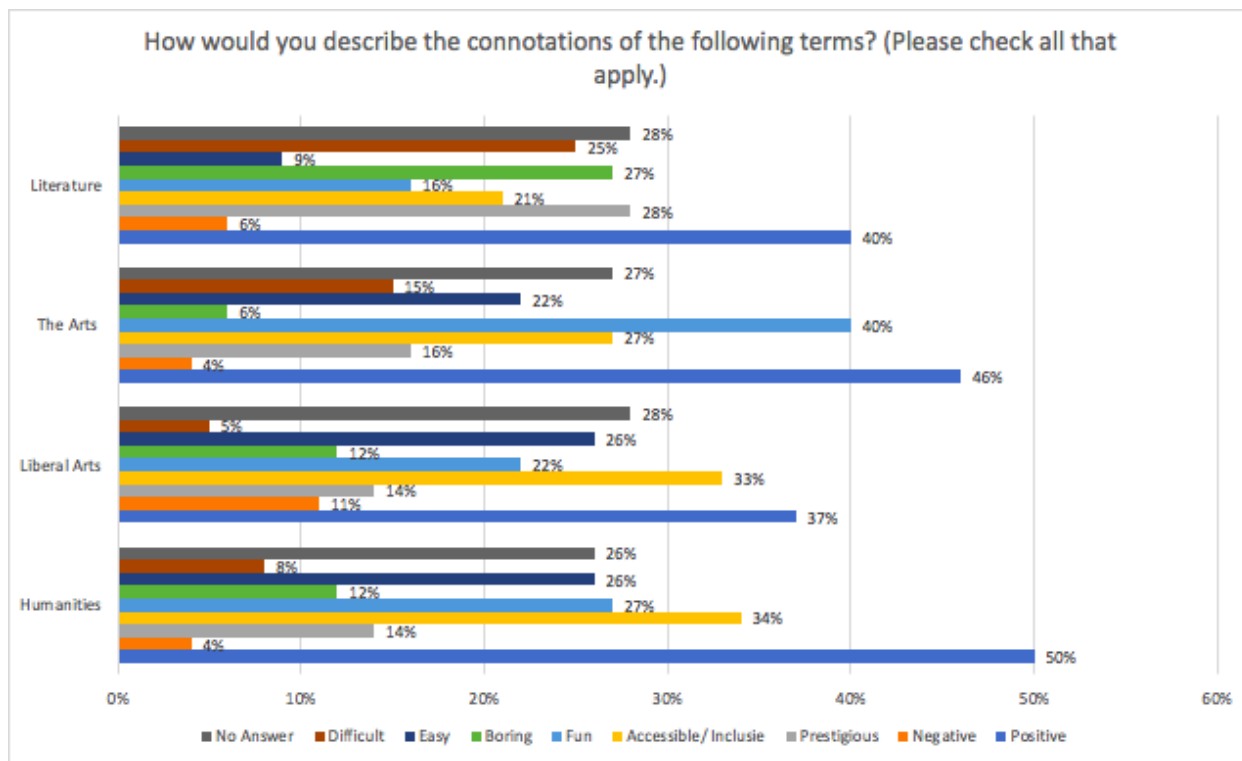


Fig. 2: QU35 results

II: Observations

Several notable trends stand out in QU34, which asked respondents how they would define the value or purpose of the humanities, arts, social sciences, and STEM in a college education as well as the value of the humanities and the arts in a high school education . First, the value “makes you a good person” received the highest percentage of respondents for both high school and college curricula. Further, while other values had higher responses in those categories, it is still striking that 24% of respondents were willing to say that each of these categories have the ability to make someone a “good person,” the most morally weighty response available. In the case of the both “the arts” and “humanities,” the perception that they “make you a good person” received a higher percentage at the high school level than at the college level.

What differs significantly with respect to this choice is the category of STEM. While the option “makes you a good person” is in the range between 17% (arts in college) and 24% (humanities in high school and college) for all other categories, only 14% believe that STEM makes you a good person, demonstrating that respondents do not perceive this quality to be intrinsic to the value of STEM fields. However, if we add up the percentages for “makes you a good person” with “prepares you to contribute something positive to society and to the world,” than the total

for STEM fields comes much closer to the totals for humanities and social sciences. Thus, it seems as if STEM is perceived as contributing to doing good for the world, just as with other disciplines, but that respondents do not necessarily perceive said contribution to make one a better individual.

Second, when asked to consider prestige, most respondents selected "a college education" at a higher rate than for the humanities, arts, or social sciences. This seems curious; why do all of these specific areas of study *within* a college education seem less prestigious than the general idea of any college education? Indeed, it seems most of that prestige comes from STEM fields, as the rate of answers selecting "gives you prestige" for STEM fields in a college education is at least double that of other fields.

We can similarly address the value, "teaches you marketable job skills." STEM and social sciences are thought to be able to teach you marketable job skills (with 56% and 40% of respondents selecting these answers, respectively), while the other categories range between 25% (humanities in college) and 11% (arts in high school). Therefore, respondents believe that the social sciences and STEM fields each teach job skills. However, the social sciences are nevertheless perceived as less prestigious than STEM fields, with respondents rating their prestige as closer to that of the arts or humanities.

Third, STEM in a college education is the area where most values shift; "personal fulfillment" is the lowest with respect to the other college level disciplines, with 52% (the range for this category as a whole is between 48% for humanities in high school and 65% for college education as a whole). "Teaches marketable job skills" and "gives prestige" have their highest rankings in the STEM category (56% and 54%). It seems that in most students' minds, STEM offers a clear trade-off of more job opportunities and more prestige at the expense of pursuing one's passions. Even though 52% did choose personal fulfillment for STEM, it seems that many respondents don't see STEM as a set of subjects that could *be* a passion/interest or fulfilling, but rather as a substitute for passion. However, prestige and job security aren't the only values respondents see in the sciences; STEM and the social sciences were the only two categories where the values "prepares you to contribute something positive to society and the world" were the most-chosen response.

Part of the surveyed population may have taken the STEM path as a substitution to their interests because they were more interested in prestige and in the job skills that STEM fields could give them, but the drop is not dramatic--that is, it does not reflect the attitude of most respondents. Indeed, the "gives you personal fulfillment" answer for a college education, in general, seems to be close to an average of all the categories.

In QU35, which asked respondents to describe the connotations of the humanities, liberal arts, the arts, and literature, the most conspicuous data point is how different the responses for "literature" are from the other categories, especially in terms of the values "difficult," at 25%, and "boring," at 27%. The range for all the other categories is much lower. For liberal arts, 5% of

respondents selected “difficult,” while for the arts, 15% selected “difficult”; meanwhile, 6% of respondents selected “boring” in response to this question in relation to the arts, and 12% selected “boring” in relation to both the liberal arts and the humanities. Literature also has the highest response in terms of prestige, with 28% of respondents selecting that it is “prestigious,” as opposed to 14% describing the humanities and the liberal arts as prestigious and 16% describing the arts this way. However, there appears to be a direct correlation between being prestigious and being boring: literature is considered more than twice as boring as the humanities in general (27% versus 12%). It is also possible that this relates to the perceived difficulty of literature (25%, versus 5% for liberal arts and 15% for the arts) as well as its inaccessibility (only 21% considered literature accessible/inclusive, versus 34% for the humanities).

This alignment matches the results from QU34, where the perception seems to be that the sciences’ status as more prestigious goes hand-in-hand with their status as less fun. It would be interesting to compare these results from “literature” with further questions that ask about other specific fields. This is worth emphasizing--future research could see how/why the narrative of “prestige” is seen as being automatically “boring,” “hard,” and otherwise painful--as though something one enjoys has less intrinsic value.

On a more minor note, the ordering of the adjectives from most chosen to least chosen remains identical for “the humanities” and “liberal arts,” but then changes slightly with “the arts,” where “accessible/inclusive” gets ousted as second place by “fun,” and “difficult” rises from the least chosen to the third-least chosen. It would be interesting to find out what specific subject areas or career fields students have in mind when they hear each of these three terms.

The humanities, the arts, and the liberal arts are generally considered in positive terms. The percentage of “negative” terms used to describe each is far lower than “positive” terms for all the four categories considered here. They are all considered easy, accessible, and fun in general, more or less equally. There is still a relevant percentage of respondents that considers these subjects boring: 12% for humanities and liberal arts, and 6% for the arts. Why are the arts considered so much less boring than the humanities and liberal arts? The arts are also considered “fun” by 40% of the respondents, while only 22% consider the liberal arts “fun.” However, the arts are also considered less accessible than the liberal arts, which ties into larger issues of inequity in secondary and postsecondary education.

In QU34, which asked about the arts, humanities, liberal arts specifically tied to educational institutions, 19% described the arts in college as prestigious and 10% described the arts in high school as prestigious. In QU35, 14% considered the humanities and liberal arts as prestigious. The field of literature, however, is considered more prestigious than the humanities or liberal arts, with a percentage of 28% respondents selecting this option.