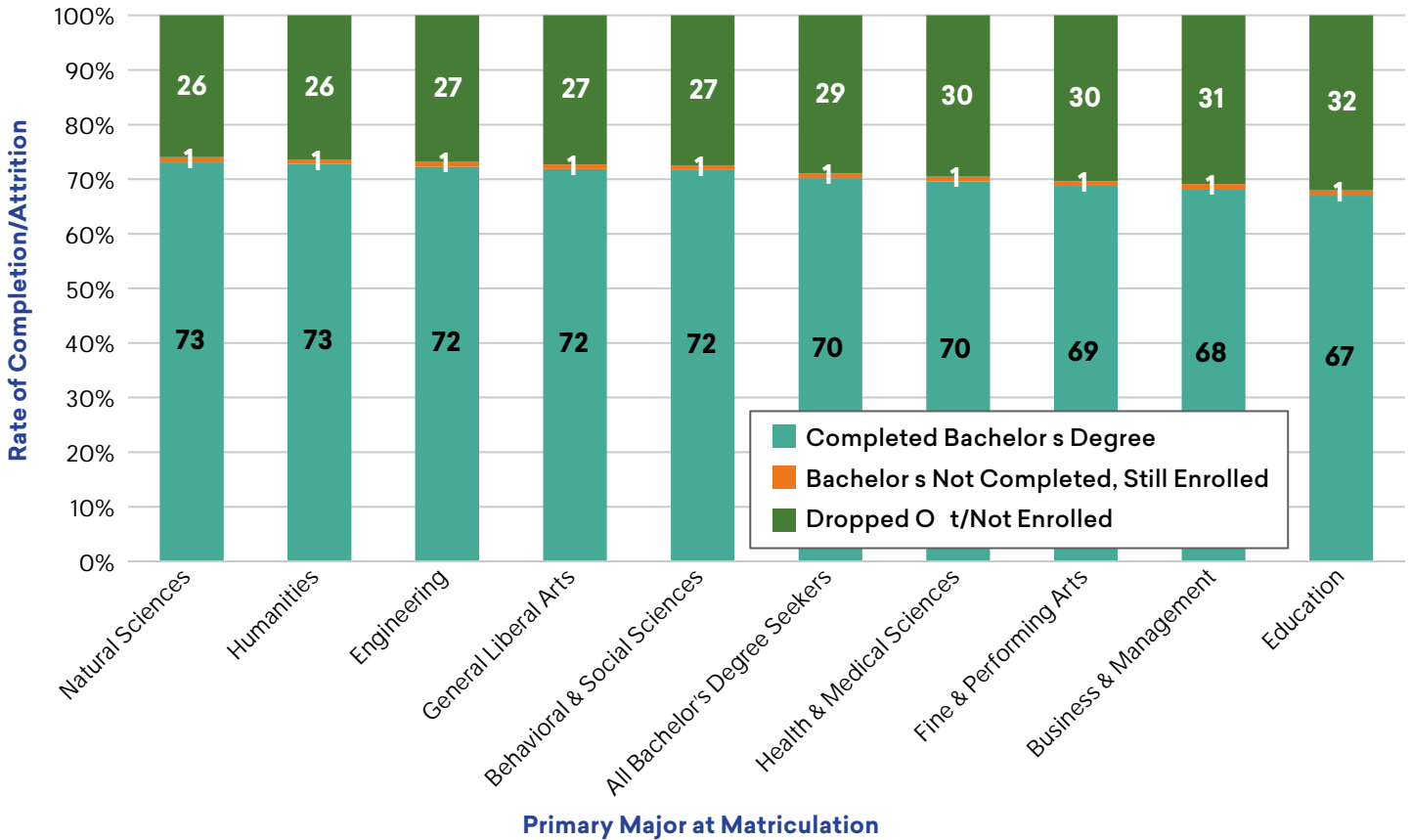


### 1 Completion and Attrition Among Students Starting a Bachelor's Degree Program in Fall 2017 (Status as of Summer 2024), by Primary Major Declared in 2017



(Interactive figure at <https://api.everviz.com/share/sgiCDrtht>)

According to the National Clearinghouse, almost two million students started working toward a bachelor's degree in fall 2017; of that number, 91,751 (4.6%) selected a primary major in one of the humanities disciplines. We know from Department of Education data that an average of around 7.5% of the bachelor's degrees awarded from 2017 to 2022 were in the humanities.<sup>2</sup> The difference between matriculations and degrees is explained by the humanities gaining more majors from other fields than it lost to either attrition or its own students switching to another major.

Among the students in the fall 2017 cohort, 72.8% of those who started with a humanities major had completed a bachelor's degree by summer 2024, slightly higher than the average completion rate of 70.2% among all students entering that year (Figure 1). Among the majors declared at matriculation (first entry into baccalaureate studies), the completion rates ranged from a high of 73.1% of those who declared a major in the natural sciences (a fraction of a point higher than the humanities) to a low of 67% among those who started with a major in education.

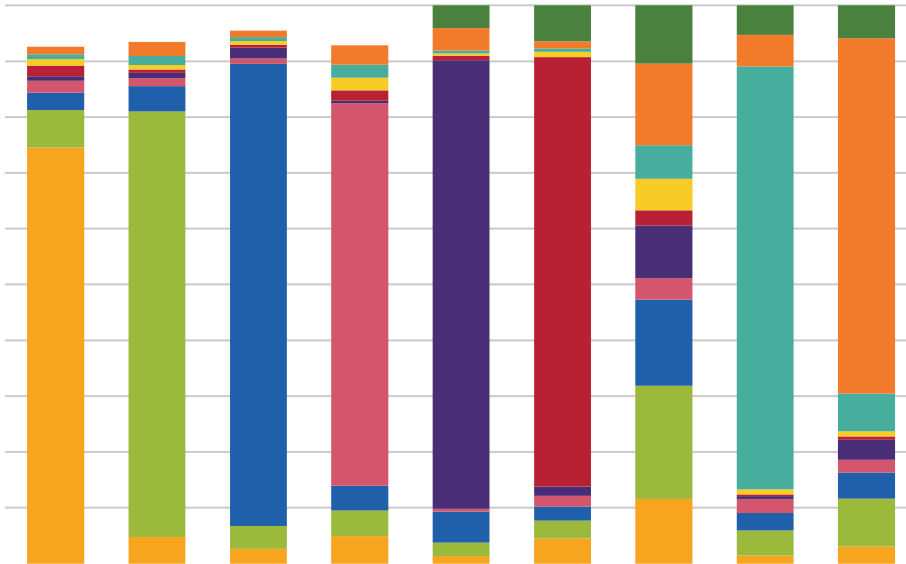
Slightly more than 26% of the students who declared a humanities major in fall 2017 had either dropped out or were no longer enrolled in a degree program by summer 2024. (A remaining 0.8% were still ac-

the movement of students from the time they matriculated into baccalaureate studies to their status as of summer 2024 (on the right). This shows the shares of students who left their studies without a degree (28.9% of the original cohort of students), were still enrolled toward a degree (almost 1%), had earned a degree in the humanities (5.6%), or had completed a degree in a nonhumanities field (64.6%).

Of the almost 92,000 students who began their studies with a major in the humanities, 49,808 (54%) finished with a degree in the humanities.

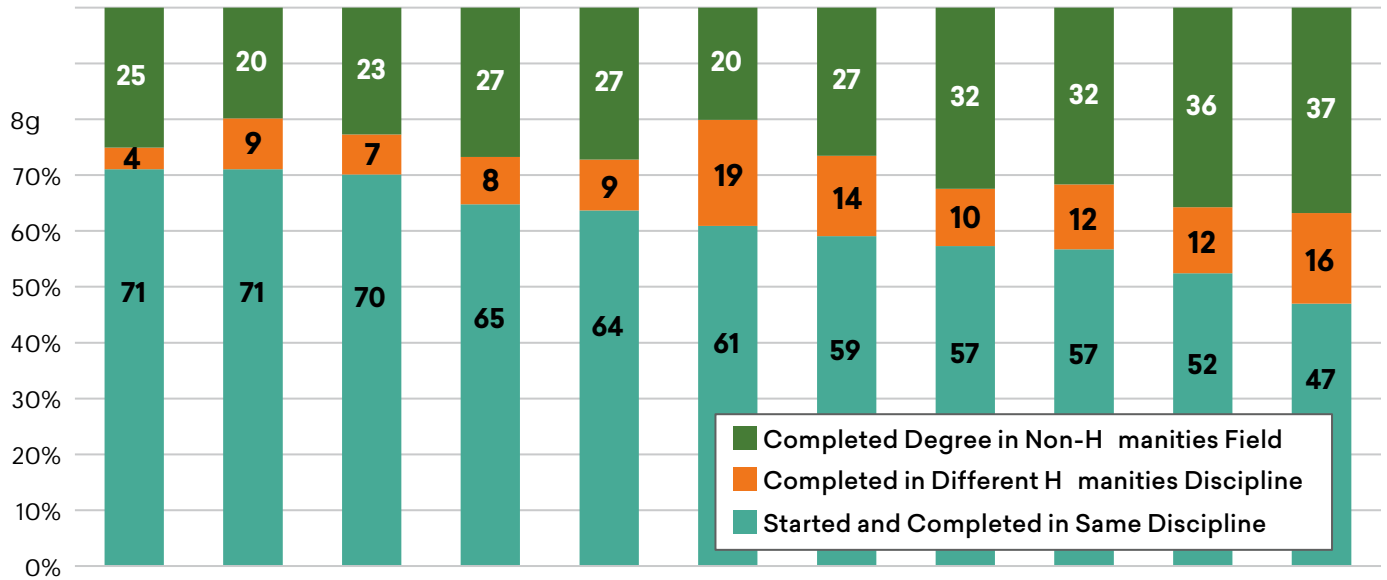
This was slightly below the rates at which students completed their degree in their original major in other fields, including in engineering (58%) and business (57%), but similar to the rates for students starting in the arts, social and behavioral sciences, and health and medical sciences. The humanities'

### 3 Primary Field of Degree, by Primary Major Declared at Matriculation (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2023)



a major in a humanities discipline and completed a degree, 74.5% finished with a primary degree in the humanities. This was similar to students who started in the social/behavioral sciences, the health/medical sciences, and the fine and performing arts but modestly lower than the share among graduates who started in business and management (82.8%) and engineering (80.4%). The natural sciences had a comparatively small share stick with the field to the end (just 64%).

#### 4 Retention Rates Among Degree Completers Who Matriculated With a Primary Major in the Humanities, by Discipline (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2023)



substantial differences in retention rate were observed among the disciplines.

## 5 Primary Field of Major Declared at Matriculation, by Primary Field of Degree (Fall 2017 Cohort, Status as of Summer 2023)



the students completing degrees in the humanities had started their studies with a major in one of the disciplines, as more than half of the graduates started in another subject area—the lowest share of any field.

Comparing Figure 3 and Figure 5 highlights not only the success of the humanities in retaining students who started in the field but also its ability to attract students from other fields. In addition to the sizable percentage of humanities graduates who started out with general liberal arts majors, 5% migrated from each of the following fields: social and behavioral sciences, business and management, the natural sciences, and “Other.” If one excludes the

general liberal arts, the humanities drew the largest share of its graduates from other fields, though the behavioral/social sciences were a close second.

“easy” majors that a student might retreat to, other survey research notes that faculty in the humanities and social sciences do a much better job of mentoring and supporting their students, thereby attracting more of them into their subjects.<sup>5</sup>



In addition to the movement between majors, this study also examined the relationship between first



Of the approximately 16% of humanities degree completers who graduated with a second degree, 61.7% had their second major in another humanities discipline. This tendency to earn first and second majors in the same field was common to all the major fields. More than half of the students earning a second degree in one of the major academic fields received both primary and secondary degrees in the same field. Business and manage-

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The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) has been reporting a decline in the number of students pursuing bachelor's degrees and the number of students pursuing a major in the humanities in recent years. The number of enrolled humanities majors fell 24% from fall 2015 to fall 2023, with most of the decline occurring after 2019. General liberal arts enrollments dropped by roughly the same amount (26%). The total number of students working toward bachelor's degrees also fell over the 2015–2023 time period, but by a more modest 6%.

This decline was far more dramatic than that seen in other fields. The field with the second-largest drop, education, experienced a decline of 14%. The field with the largest number of undergraduate students (business and management) fell a mere 3%, and engineering majors increased by 9%.

This study was not intended to predict trends in the reported numbers of students earning humanities degrees in the near future, but the trends reported by NSC offer a troubling indicator of continued waning support for the field among students currently enrolled toward the degree. How it will translate into degree completions over the next few years remains to be seen.

These studies on baccalaureate students are intended to enhance our understanding of how students move through their programs and how many complete their



1. The degree completions data serve as the basis for most of the analyses in the Humanities Indicators section on higher education: <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education>.

2. For more on the trends in degree recipients, see the Humanities Indicators, “Bachelor’s Degrees in the Humanities,” at <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities>.

3. The Humanities Indicators project includes the general liberal arts category in the humanities when tabulating degrees, as state research found that they require a significant number of humanities courses for completion. However, our preliminary research for this study revealed that as a major selected upon entry, this category appears to serve as a substitute for the “undeclared” category at many institutions, with very different resulting behaviors from matriculation to completion. For that reason, the category is treated separately in this report.

4. A Department of Education transcript study in 2017 indicated that more than a third of students will change their majors within the first three years of entering college. National Center for Education Statistics, “Beginning College Students Who Change Their Majors Within 3 Years of Enrollment,” NCES 2018-434 (December 2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/2018-434>.

# Humanities INDICATORS

[HumanitiesIndicators.org](https://HumanitiesIndicators.org)