

“SPEAK UP, PAY IT FORWARD”:

Humanities transfers share their perspective

In April, the Humanities Transfer Pathway project hosted *Speak Up, Pay It Forward*, a virtual focus group and online survey for humanities transfer students to share their experience and perspective.

Our group was small—just three focus group discussants and five survey respondents—so any results are only suggestive. Yet even this modest sample engaged a cross-section of English, Philosophy and Humanities and Justice students (no History students participated) with roughly half experiencing in-person learning before the pandemic. Their comments clarify how we can achieve several Pathway goals:

Goal 1: Strengthen supports for students transferring into the humanities

The transfer experience can be bewildering. As one student said, “John Jay says *thanks for coming, we’re happy you’re part of our community* and then they just throw you to the sharks.” Our discussants faced a host of challenges, from finding offices to picking classes. Yet their concerns did not come pre-sorted into buckets for academic advising, curricula or career counseling. Instead, these themes overlapped: which courses are offered frequently or infrequently by their departments, and why? Which courses, internships, graduate programs, and careers might dovetail with their intellectual interests?

All our discussants found academic advisors helpful in answering these questions, but most also perceived them as saddled with heavy caseloads. Therefore, students also leaned on faculty and peers to complement advising. Every discussant could name a faculty member to whom they turned for advice—though most were also unaware of the major advisors in their departments.

Combining different supports proved beneficial. Respondents who turned to peers and faculty for help picking courses also “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they knew where to go for major-related advice. Conversely, those who relied on academic advisors alone for course picks (or in the case of one student, simply, “myself”) did not know where to go for other major-related advice.

- **Implications:** we can support transfer students by building closer links between the people that they look to for support, such as academic advisors, major advisors, and career counselors. By making sure these supports are coordinated, and by consistently referring students between them, we can help students obtain comprehensive guidance rather than assembling a patchwork on their own.
- **Next steps:** In summer 2021, we will host discussions to coordinate transfer supports between academic and major advisors, and introduce students to their major advisors through the Summer Bridge program. In the fall, we will pair incoming humanities transfers with Peer Leaders, who will help integrate students into the humanities community.



English



History



Humanities & Justice



Philosophy

LAUNCHED in 2020, the Humanities Transfer Pathway project supports students from CUNY community colleges entering humanities majors at John Jay College.

We are building links between transfer supports, peer mentorship programs, and “applied humanities” curricula and co-curricular activities, to strengthen transfer student success.

Q: What supports could help prepare transfer students for the next move after college?

A: “Professors...speaking more on the application process when it comes to preparing yourself for your next steps...That way you can reach out and say, ‘hey do you think you can help me with this letter of recommendation or an opinion on something.’”

Goal 2: Help students apply their humanities education in a range of careers

Some of our discussants arrived at John Jay with a career already in mind, such as law school, and found field-specific supports like the Pre-Law Institute invaluable. Others used their humanities major in a more exploratory way, to test out interests and careers through coursework and internships. At least one discussant wished faculty would help in this process by “speaking more on the application process when it comes to preparing yourself for your next steps” after graduation, and by providing “help...with this letter of recommendation or an opinion on something.”

Complementing the career center with advice from faculty, or field-specific preparation in the Pre-Law Institute, helped students link their degree to a career: respondents who combined these supports “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they knew what careers they could pursue with their degree. A respondent who relied on the career center alone felt “neutral,” while those who relied on “google,” or “no one” “strongly disagreed” that they knew where their degree could lead them.

- **Implications:** we can support transfer students by crafting more field-specific pathways to careers beyond law and graduate school. For students exploring different paths, we can also coordinate more closely between career counselors and faculty, and create venues in which faculty help students link humanities ideas with real-world justice issues and professions.
- **Next Steps:** in the 2021-2022 academic year, we will pilot an Experiential Learning course in which students will explore how humanities concepts apply to justice issues in different professional fields. At the same time, we will develop a humanities-wide internship course.

Goal 3: Help develop a John Jay humanities community

All our discussants emphasized the challenges of building community virtually. While noting exceptional efforts by instructors, students still found it hard to connect with peers and faculty in informal ways—interactions that happen naturally before and after classes, in hallways and doorways. At the same time, several students found virtual methods valuable. Whether virtually or in-person, students desired un-graded settings to explore humanities ideas and justice issues.

Two discussants also felt marginalized as humanities students at John Jay. “We are the minority,” said one student, “it’s a school for Criminal Justice, there’s not that many students that are deciding [to] come here and be History and Philosophy and English majors.” Humanities electives, they felt, are offered less frequently than others, while career opportunities tend to center criminal justice and legal professions. This sentiment was not reflected in our survey results, but it suggests the importance of forging humanities community and identity.

- **Implications:** we can support transfer students by creating informal spaces where students explore humanities ideas and consider how they apply to real-world issues and professions. This approach can deepen students’ grasp of humanities knowledge, and at the same time, strengthen their sense of belonging in a humanities community that is making unique contributions to justice issues.
- **Next step:** the 2021 Summer Bridge program will feature discussions of justice issues among humanities faculty, and throughout the academic year Peer Leaders will organize an engagement series to build humanities community among students and faculty.

“We are the minority at John Jay. It’s a school for Criminal Justice, there’s not that many students that are deciding [to] come here and be History and Philosophy and English majors.”

- Student discussant

The Pathway will continue to expand in the 2021-22 academic year, as we welcome the first cohort of humanities transfer students from BMCC with Pathway supports.

If you would like to explore transfer student issues with us, or connect your work with the Pathway, please get in touch! Email us at: cjahumanities@jjay.cuny.edu.

Appendix: Focus Group and Survey Results

Focus Group Qualitative Codes:

Class preparation
Humanities: social
Career skills
Major advisors
Electives exploration
Non-CJ minority
Virtual social challenges
Faculty as advisors
Humanities: elective exploration
Electives exploration

Survey Results:

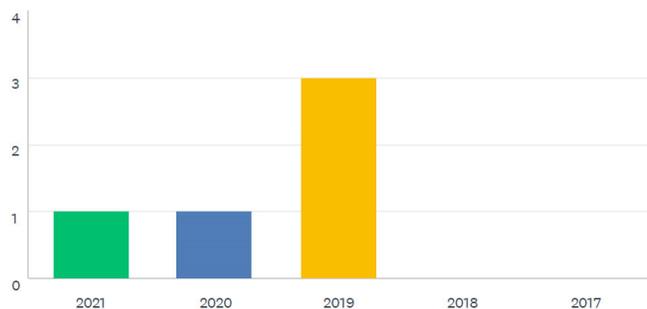
Q1 What is your major?

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0



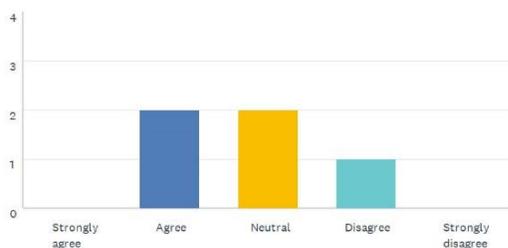
Q2 When did you transfer to John Jay?

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0

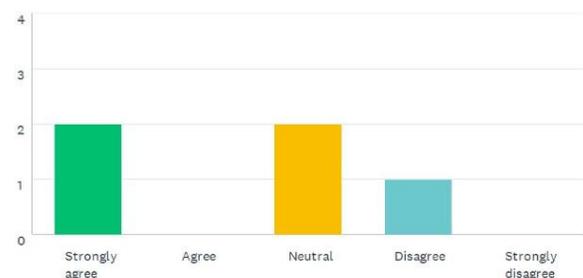


Q3 I picked my major because I get to explore interests I wouldn't otherwise get to explore.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0

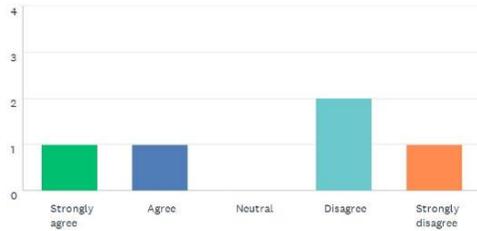


Q4 My major is valued at John Jay as much as other majors.



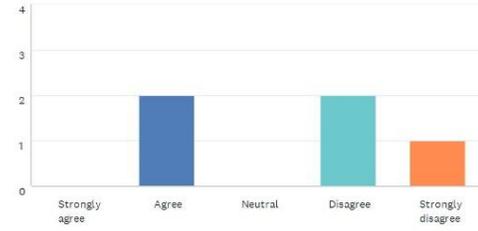
Q5 When I have questions about something in my major, I know who to talk to.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0



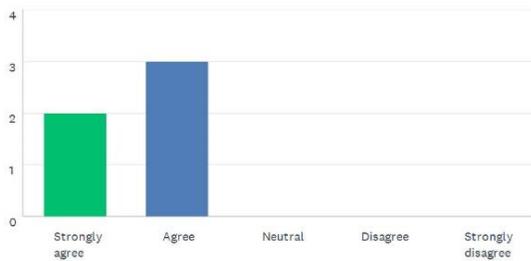
Q6 When I encounter challenges in my major courses, I know where to go on campus to get help.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0



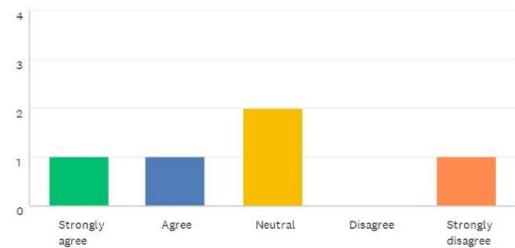
Q7 The skills I've learned in my major have helped me succeed academically.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0



Q8 I know what careers I can pursue with my major after graduation.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 0



10 What do you find most challenging about the academic work in your major courses?

- Intensive reading
- Completing all of the assignments on time, especially since most of my classes are writing intensive so each assignment is time consuming.
- As a transfer student who has not been to college in long time, the writing was hard.
- Staying focused through remote learning. Finding good, reliable sources during research for the thesis.
- A lot of reading and writing is challenging for 5 classes each semester.

Q11 Who do you turn to for advice on which courses you should take?

- Advising
- Academic Advisement Center
- fellow classmates
- To my major advisor, professor _____

- Myself

Q12 Who do you turn to for help exploring your career options?

- Career center
- No one
- My teachers, and the Pre-Law Institute
- JJAY careers online.
- Google

Q13 What is the best way you have found to connect with other students in your major?

- I haven't
- Through classes.
- i only had a semester and a half on campus, so I text and email
- Through class and group texts.
- I haven't connected with anyone in my major