Two recent reports on the beleaguered state of the humanities have had pundits of all stripes scrambling to explain what many see as a dismal statistic: the proportion of college students graduating with degrees in subjects like English or history has fallen to a mere 7 percent in 2010, down from 14 percent in 1966.

Is the state of the economy to blame? The obsession with the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, math)? The anti-humanities rhetoric of right-wing politicians? The ideological excesses of left-wing professors?

Now one number-crunching historian has pointed the finger in an unexpected direction: women.

At the blog Sapping Attention, Ben Schmidt, a doctoral candidate in history at Princeton University, notes that between 1950 and 2002, the percentage of male college students who major in the humanities nationally remained steady at roughly 7 percent. The percentage of female college students majoring in the humanities, however, fell dramatically, to 9 percent from 15 percent.

To Mr. Schmidt, this gives the lie to the idea, advanced in a recent Op-Ed column by David Brooks of the New York Times, that the humanities “committed suicide” by focusing on “class, race and
gender” at the expense of eternal questions. Instead, he suggests (tongue in cheek), they may have been murdered by egalitarians who made other fields more welcoming to women.

Some women may have shifted to the sciences. But the biggest change, according to charts Mr. Schmidt made a few years ago as part of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Indicators Project, may be business majors.

“Between 1970 and 1985, women jumped from 10 percent of all business degrees to 50 percent,” he wrote in an e-mail. Within the liberal arts, he added, the biggest shift was to the social sciences and what survey data nebulously referred to as “interdisciplinary liberal arts.”

Mr. Schmidt’s gender analysis is only the latest quantitative assault on the “crisis in the humanities” story that has taken hold since the release of the two reports, produced by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and by Harvard University.

In a post earlier this month, Mr. Schmidt, who is completing a fellowship at Harvard’s “Culturomics” project, which is tries to quantitatively study of human culture, noted that the big plunge in humanities majors in fact came in the 1970s, following an anomalous boom in the 1960s. (The past decade, contrary to popular perception, has not seen large declines.)

Nate Silver of The New York Times blog FiveThirtyEight has also weighed in. The panic over the seemingly dismal number of humanities majors, he says in a recent post, has omitted one crucial fact: far more Americans are attending college than ever before.
The crucial statistic, he says, is not the percentage of college graduates who receive humanities degrees, but the percentage of the entire college-age population who earn such degrees.

The number of college graduates, he says, is much higher than in 1971, when there were 26.7 bachelor’s degrees granted for every hundred 21-year-olds in America. By 2011, that number had risen to 43.4, an increase of about 60 percent.

True, the distribution of degrees has shifted from English and history toward more obviously job-friendly fields like marketing, health care administration and criminal justice. “But these degrees may be going to students who would not have gone to college at all in prior generations,” he writes.

Even English — named the seventh most useless major last year by Newsweek — may not be in such bad shape, Mr. Silver says, or at least not any worse shape than before. The overall percentage of the college-age population receiving English degrees — roughly 1.1 percent of all 21-year olds in America — is roughly the same as it was 20 years ago, he notes.

Mr. Silver sees a similar pattern in many of the STEM fields, which are often presumed to thrive at the expense of the humanities. The fields that do see big increases, both in relative and absolute terms, are ones like hospital administration, criminal justice and business, which feed students into jobs that might not have required a college degree at all 20 or 30 years ago.

The real question, Mr. Silver maintains, is not how many students major in the humanities, but how much of a humanities education nonmajors receive.
“Perhaps we should at once encourage and require college students to take coursework in English – and tell them to be wary about majoring in it,” he writes.

But is an English degree really such a bad investment? At The Atlantic, Jordan Weissman cites a 2011 study from Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce showing that in 2010-2011, recent graduates with degrees in English and history had unemployment rates of 9.8 percent and 9.5 percent, respectively — nearly on par with graduates in computer and math fields (9.1 percent) or psychology and social work (8.8 percent), and ahead of economics majors (10.4 percent) and political science majors (11.1 percent).

“Score one for the lit nerds,” Mr. Weissman writes.