

By Terry Nardin

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## Commentary: A liberal arts education in Singapore and the usefulness of 'useless' knowledge

The idea of a liberal arts education challenges the pre-eminence of vocational preparation. Yale-NUS College's Terry Nardin discusses the value of a liberal arts education.



The new Yale-NUS College campus. Yale-NUS College graduated its first cohort of 119 graduates in 2017. (Photos: Yale-NUS' Facebook page)

SINGAPORE: If you were considering a tertiary education ten years ago, your top choices were likely to have been law, accounting or engineering.

To many in Singapore and Asia, the purpose of tertiary education is to equip students with technical or other specialised skills that qualify them for a specific job and stable employment.

Universities do more than this, of course, but they typically require early specialisation.

The idea of a liberal arts education challenges this view of the importance of vocational preparation.

Broad-based and multidisciplinary in approach, it is less closely linked with a defined job path after graduation.

Liberal arts colleges, which are based on this approach, are common in the United States.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education made a bold move to offer a new pathway of education for young people in Singapore by establishing a college here that would allow them to pursue a liberal arts education locally.

But many have yet to appreciate what a liberal arts education is and why Singaporeans should care about it.

### FLEXIBILITY IN THINKING

The key differentiator is that liberal arts students are exposed to a range of disciplines. This encourages flexibility in thinking and develops an ability to approach a problem from multiple angles. Students typically spend their first few years in classes in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences before selecting a major.

At Yale-NUS, this takes the form of immersion in a common curriculum, where the experience ranges from reading classics of literature and philosophy from India, China, Africa and Europe to studying scientific inquiry and quantitative reasoning.



The new Yale-NUS College campus. (Photos: Yale-NUS' Facebook page)

Part of my title, “the usefulness of useless knowledge”, is borrowed from a book first published in 1939 by Abraham Flexner, the founder and first director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Flexner had studied classics as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University and then psychology at Harvard.

He argued that basic research – inquiry motivated by curiosity and imagination rather than by practical goals – can eventually lead to technological breakthroughs based on new discoveries. He saw that technologies based on old knowledge, like railroads, would eventually fail to match those based on new ideas, like digital computing.

Flexner’s argument is also a good reminder that a liberal arts education does not ignore science but includes it. The physical and life sciences, along with mathematics and computer science, are part of the liberal arts curriculum.

In a liberal arts college, these subjects are studied as distinct and interesting ways of thinking, rather than mainly as a set of tools to be applied in solving engineering, medical or other technical problems.

For instance, a liberal arts student who majored in computer science, and has an understanding of regional political structures through courses in politics and economics, can potentially offer more value to an IT firm wishing to expand its regional business operations.

A liberal arts education trains a person to develop the ability to learn new things and apply them quickly.

#### **BREADTH IN THINKING**

This emphasis on breadth, along with the ability to look at a problem from a variety of angles that goes with it, is a quintessential aspect of the liberal arts curriculum. It enables liberal arts colleges to produce graduates who succeed because they have acquired the range of ideas and abilities needed to move from narrowly defined jobs to leadership positions.

Adaptability is especially critical in today’s rapidly changing environment.

Another feature of a liberal arts education is its emphasis on discussion-based learning in small groups and early exposure to hands-on research. Students are encouraged to reflect on what they are learning and to articulate what they have learned. They must also practise how to reach reasoned consensus with their peers and instructors.

These are valuable qualities that liberal arts colleges, because of their small size and high teacher-student ratios, are better able than large universities to provide.



The new Yale-NUS College campus. (Photos: Yale-NUS' Facebook page)

#### SOUGHT-AFTER

The marketplace knows the value of these qualities. Liberal arts graduates are highly sought after. Employment statistics for Yale-NUS College, like those for liberal arts colleges worldwide, show that their graduates compete well, even in technological fields.

According to the recently released Singapore Graduate Employment Survey, for example, Yale-NUS class of 2017 graduates achieved an employment rate of over 93 per cent within the first six months of graduation, as compared to overall employment rate of 88.9 per cent, as measured by a graduate employment survey which polled over 11,000 fresh graduates from NUS, NTU and SMU.

The top six industries that graduates from the liberal arts college joined were business and management consultancy; financial and insurance; information and communication; education; public administration and defence; and arts, entertainment and recreation.

One Yale-NUS graduate, a Mathematical, Computational and Statistical Sciences major, joined Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is now a country officer at the Ministry's Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific directorate.

Looking back on his time at Yale-NUS, he commented that subjects he had studied outside his major, such as history and philosophy, had strengthened his understanding of the geopolitical dimensions of Singapore's foreign policy.

Equally valuable were the analytical, writing and presentation skills that he acquired in the college's small seminars.

#### THE CASE FOR A LIBERAL ARTS ENVIRONMENT

There are two reasons why these qualities are best cultivated in a liberal arts environment. First, liberal arts students learn to think and communicate in different modes because the education they receive is broad and diverse.

Second, the faculty-to-student ratio in a liberal arts college is designed to allow for close interaction. It is typically far lower than the ratio in universities. While universities offer some seminars, small seminars are the primary mode of instruction in liberal arts colleges generally and at Yale-NUS.

Many liberal arts graduates go on to pursue postgraduate study, and several among the first batch of Yale-NUS graduates have won acceptance at leading universities. One was selected to join the prestigious Schwarzman Scholars programme at Tsinghua University and another to attend Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.

These successes are not limited to Yale-NUS. Evidence shows that liberal arts graduates are disproportionately successful in leadership positions.

Contributing to these successes is the advantage of having been able to spend their college years finding their way around many different subjects, cultivating a variety of skills and getting accustomed to different styles of thinking.

In contrast to a course of study that focuses on training students who are expected to specialise from the start in particular subjects, a liberal arts education encourages students to range widely beyond their eventual major, to enjoy learning for learning's sake, and to sharpen their mental agility.



Students sitting around campus. (File photo)

#### A SENSE OF CURIOSITY, A SENSE OF CHARACTER

Beyond the employability and successes of a liberal arts graduate lies a deeper point: If we say that knowledge must be for some good, we must ask what that good is, and why it is important.

Are the things we usually think of as good – promises of better career prospects, wealth and the pleasures that money can buy – really the ultimate goods? Being able to think creatively is itself a pleasure. So is being able to read widely and to understand what one reads.

While applications of knowledge to solving technical problems are important, so are the ideas on which they are ultimately based.

The goal of a liberal arts education is in part to cultivate a sense of curiosity and to allow new ideas to develop. We cannot know in advance which new ideas will be most exciting and illuminating, or prove useful in the long run.

What then, is the ultimate point of chasing knowledge? Thinkers in Greece, China and elsewhere puzzled over these questions thousands of years ago. They concluded that the ultimate good is to realise one's full human potential. This, to thinkers like Aristotle and Confucius, meant intellectual contemplation and moral virtue.

To contemplate is to think in a detached way about something in order to understand its assumptions and implications. And to understand moral virtue is to cultivate what we call "character".

"You go to a great school," Cory said, "not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage, and for mental soberness."



National University of Singapore graduates at a commencement ceremony. (Photo: Lionel Lin)

#### SUCCESS STORIES

Yale-NUS graduated its first class only last year, so it cannot yet point to alumni who succeeded later in life. However, there are many successful liberal arts graduates. Here is an example that might resonate with those who love music, as many do.

Luke Wood graduated in 1991 from Wesleyan University, an American liberal arts college, where he had majored in American Studies. Wood was able to turn his passion for music into an internship at Geffen Records, after which he signed artists for DreamWorks and Interscope.

In 2011 he became chief operating officer and president of Beats Electronics, the parent company of Beats by Dr Dre and Beats Audio, handling a wide range of strategic and operational activities in consumer electronics.

In 2014, Beats was acquired by Apple.

Wood's success is another good reminder that "useless knowledge" can not only turn out to be useful after all, but also that usefulness is in the eye of the beholder.

*Terry Nardin is professor of political science and director of Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS College in Singapore.*

Source: CNA/sl