

**Richard Levin and
Tan Chorh Chuan**

As co-founders of Yale-NUS College, we rejoice in the National University of Singapore's (NUS) launch of a College of Humanities and Sciences (CHS) in December.

This ambitious initiative, led by NUS president Tan Eng Chye, will enable 2,200 students a year to acquire the breadth of knowledge, perspectives of multiple disciplines and tools of critical thinking that they will need to thrive in a complex and highly interconnected world.

The new college will bring together the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences to offer a broad-based common curriculum delivered through problem-based pedagogies. Students will also have the flexibility to choose from multiple educational pathways.

In higher education, such major reforms do not come from thin air; there is usually a long runway of antecedent innovation.

NUS is no exception. Its investment in Yale-NUS College has demonstrated how a liberal arts education can nurture creative, intellectually agile and engaged graduates who are well prepared for career success, societal contribution and global citizenship.

Liberal arts education – which embraces the humanities as well as social and natural sciences – has two distinguishing characteristics.

First, students gain a strong understanding of multiple disciplinary perspectives and approaches and how they can be employed to interpret and analyse nature, society and the individual.

Only after broad multidisciplinary exposure do students choose a specialisation.

Second, there is a focus on the development of critical thinking skills that can be applied across different knowledge domains. This is crucial in a world where knowledge evolves rapidly and the problems facing society are complex.

It enables liberal arts graduates to zoom out to see the broader picture and the connections among key issues, and to zoom in to rigorously analyse specific areas and forge creative syntheses.

NUS began experimenting with liberal arts education in 1998 with the introduction of the Core Curriculum. Renamed the University Scholars Programme three years later, it enables 200 undergraduates a year from seven faculties to explore topics outside their major subject in small classes using interactive pedagogies.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education's International Academic Advisory Panel recommended an even more ambitious project – an autonomous residential liberal arts college that would compete with the very best in the world.

NUS initiated a feasibility study and when the two of us met at the World Economic Forum in 2009, we decided to explore the idea further. Four years later, Yale-NUS College was up and running.



Yale-NUS College (above), a partnership between Yale University and the National University of Singapore, has inspired other schools in Asia to adopt the liberal arts model, such as Duke Kunshan University in China and Ashoka University in India. PHOTO: ST FILE

Yale-NUS welcomes NUS College of Humanities and Sciences

For NUS, Yale was an ideal partner to reimagine liberal arts education. Yale-NUS College would provide the kind of rigorous broad-based education that students here will need to assume leadership roles in a fast-changing globalised environment. It would also accelerate the pace of educational innovation in NUS and Singapore by pioneering new approaches and pedagogies for holistic education and critical inquiry.

For Yale, partnering with NUS meant a renewal of one of its distinctive historical roles. As a pioneer in liberal arts education, it led the way in spreading the concept throughout the United States.

From the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, Yale graduates founded a highly disproportionate share of the new colleges established in the country's east, south and mid-west.

Advancing liberal arts education throughout Asia in the 21st century was a worthy undertaking, consistent with Yale tradition. And Singapore was the right place to start, because of its commitment to higher education as an engine of economic and

social advancement.

The returns to our joint efforts have exceeded even our own optimistic expectations. The faculties at the two universities worked closely to design an imaginative and distinctive curriculum. The objective was to give every student exposure to multiple disciplines and the co-evolution of Asian and Western thought and institutions.

To accomplish this, we returned to an older tradition of requiring that a large number of courses be taken in common by all students at the college. But the content of these courses is entirely novel.

First-year students study a selection of great Asian and Western literary works, and in another concurrent course, they read feted works of Asian and Western philosophy and political thought.

Other common courses explore comparative social institutions and different world perspectives offered by the study of history and social science. There are also strong foundational classes in science and quantitative reasoning.

This exposure in the first and second years helps students see the connections among disciplines

and examine problems from an interdisciplinary perspective, enriching their study of a major subject in the third and fourth years.

This curriculum is taught in small, discussion-oriented classes designed to develop interpretative, analytic and critical thinking skills.

To encourage interaction and peer-to-peer learning, students are required to live in residential colleges offering an array of programmes aimed at developing leadership skills.

Yale-NUS College provides an intense experience to an intimate cohort of 250 students a year.

It was flooded with applicants from the outset and became one of the world's most highly selective colleges.

Initial concerns about the employability of liberal arts graduates have also been put to rest. More than 90 per cent of Yale-NUS graduates find jobs within six months. The average starting salaries for Bachelor of Arts and Sciences with Honours graduates exceed those of graduates from the other universities here.

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other schools in Asia to adopt the liberal arts model, such as Duke Kunshan University in China and Ashoka University in India.

None of these global adaptations of the Yale-NUS model has been quite as exciting to us as the recent development at NUS, which reflects the value that Yale-NUS College has brought to academic innovation in Singapore.

Will the establishment of CHS affect the distinctiveness of Yale-NUS College or lead to internal competition?

We see no cause for concern. In the US, liberal arts programmes at large research universities such as the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Michigan coexist with the offerings of outstanding small liberal arts colleges such as Amherst, Williams and Swarthmore.

We are confident that both Yale-NUS College and CHS will thrive, and we salute NUS for its commitment to both.

• Professor Richard Levin was president of Yale University from 1993 to 2013, while Professor Tan Chorh Chuan was president of NUS from 2008 to 2017.