



Asia Invests in Liberal Arts

US Higher Education Expands Abroad

PERICLES LEWIS

There are worrying signs today that the United States is turning away from the tradition of liberal arts education that has made it a global leader in post-secondary education over the past century. Universities are cutting language and literature departments, students are entering majors perceived as pre-professional, and some politicians are becoming skeptical about the expenses associated with small classes taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty.

At the same time, there are signs that Asia is turning towards the liberal arts. The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Seoul National University in South Korea, Waseda University in Japan, and the National University of Singapore, to name just a few, have recently made major investments in liberal arts education as an alternative to their traditionally highly specialized and technical university programs. It seems that leaders in these Asian countries recognize what some US policy-makers overlook: a nation's strength comes from the type of education it offers.

Asian governments have recognized that in an era driven by innovation, the breadth of an education that

PERICLES LEWIS is President of Yale-NUS College, a liberal arts college in Singapore co-founded by Yale University and the National University of Singapore.

encompasses the liberal arts and sciences is a distinct advantage for future workers. Many also recognize the importance of education in history and politics for future citizens in an era of democratization. And Asian educators recognize the ethical benefits of studying literature, philosophy, and social science—the liberal arts give students an opportunity to think about their place in the world and how to live a fulfilled life.

Strong investment in research is one of the reasons for the success of US higher education, and we must hope that public and private investment continues. But the roots of US success go back before the establishment of modern research universities to the tradition of the liberal arts college. US liberal arts colleges like Amherst, Wellesley, and Swarthmore continue to offer a remarkable educa-

tion, while Ivy League universities like Yale, Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia still draw strength from their origins as liberal arts colleges. The strength of its higher education system undergirds US traditions of citizenship, leadership, and creativity, and it has drawn many talented people to this country (I came to the United States from Canada in 1990 to attend graduate school at Stanford). If the United States loses sight of its educational traditions, or sacrifices high-quality education for the lure of inexpensive online degrees, this will damage US leadership at home and abroad.

Today, liberal arts education means, above all, encouraging students' imagination and their ability to think critically about the world. It is my experience, and that of US educators generally, that this is best accomplished in small, intensive seminars focused on discussion, in which the professor does not just lecture but encourages critical discussion of a topic from multiple perspectives. This gives students the opportunity to arrive at their own understanding of the subject and to articulate that understanding. It also allows them to develop their ability to arrive at a consensus or to disagree on a basis of reasoned argument. It is for this reason that the college classroom has been called a laboratory of democracy.

Liberal arts education is not cheap: it requires engaged teaching in small groups by faculty who care deeply about undergraduates. But in a time when the mere provision of information is becoming a commodity, it is the engaged pedagogy of the liberal arts tradition that will keep US colleges and universities on top. The revolution in on-line delivery of education, through MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) does offer the prospect of a democratization of access to the great lectures, but it emphasizes a one-way delivery system—a more powerful version of the “sage on the stage”—and fails to provide some of the essential aspects of liberal arts education, namely the peer-to-peer learning that takes place in seminar rooms, residence halls, and extra-curricular activities.

For Asia, the digital revolution offers great possibilities for expanded access, but at the same time educators from primary school through graduate school in Asia are recognizing the importance of active in-class learning. The two can be combined effectively in “flipped classrooms,” theorized by J. Wesley Baker, and put into practice quite effectively at the Duke-NUS Graduate School of Medicine in Singapore.

The Tradition of Liberal Arts Education

What is liberal education? The word “liberal” referred in ancient Rome to what was most important for a free citizen to study. So, the liberal arts are closely aligned with freedom – the freedom to pursue intellectual questions and debate issues of common concern. The goals of a liberal arts education have long been to teach students to analyze carefully, to communicate effectively, and to make wise and humane decisions. The word “arts” refers historically not just to the visual or performing arts but to the whole range

of human knowledge, from language, literature, and the humanities to mathematics and the physical, biological and social sciences. Liberal arts education is explicitly not vocational—that is, not linked to a single occupation. Many students go on to graduate education in law, medicine, business or other professions or to PhD programs, but many also go directly into the workforce. The experience of the top liberal arts institutions suggests that regardless of the student's ultimate profession, a strong liberal education provides a good basis for a successful career in part because it encourages flexibility and a love of learning.

Students at Yale before the Civil War were required to study Classical Greek and Latin, mathematics, philosophy, geography, history, astronomy, and English. In the nineteenth century, the innovative Harvard President Charles W. Eliot moved away from the common curriculum and introduced the elective system for undergraduates. Eliot argued in his inaugural address of 1869 that “the young man of nineteen or twenty ought to know what he likes best and is most fit for.” Yet through all these transformations, liberal arts education continued to emphasize the breadth of knowledge that would allow students to see the world's problems in broad context.

Young people today will continue to live lives shaped by the eternal questions posed in classical literature and philosophy, but they will also need to contend with the massive flows of data let loose by the information revolution. Liberal arts education extends well beyond the traditional humanities (although the humanities remain central to it). The essence of the liberal arts approach is to provide students with broad intellectual exposure and encourage them to consider problems from many different perspectives—to ask the right questions.

Take, for example, the study of the environment; specifically the impact of the shrimp farms on mangrove forests in Southeast Asia; over a third of the world's mangrove forests have disappeared in the last two decades, largely as a result of clearing the forests for shrimp farming. These farms bring economic benefits to employees and consumers, but the disappearing mangrove forests provide essential qualities like biodiversity and a buffer against events like tsunamis. How do we address issues like these? Clearly, knowledge of botany and climatology is essential; but the management of the resources of the sea is also a matter of social norms, and changing people's relationship to those resources involves the question of humans' relationship to the natural world, which may be shaped by religious belief or historical tradition.

New generations of leaders will confront questions posed for previous generations by great thinkers in philosophy, literature, and other fields, as well as new questions that derive from the changing complexities of an interconnected world. The liberal arts encourage mastery of these challenges through exposure to a wide range of disciplines. At the same time, future leaders need skills associated with high-level research, so liberal arts education should emphasize not only breadth but also mastery

of research methods through independent projects within particular disciplines.

A Community of Learning

I have had the honor and pleasure of participating in the development of a new liberal arts college in Singapore that aims to embody some of the principles I have outlined above. Yale-NUS College is a partnership of Yale University and the National University of Singapore.

Such an education must bring the span of human knowledge together and allow students to develop their capacities to the fullest by encouraging active learning. Every student entering Yale-NUS will take a set of shared courses on subjects ranging from literature through social thought to scientific inquiry, while also majoring in a particular discipline. We expect our students to master a body of knowledge and techniques, but we also want them to be able to approach and solve problems from many different angles. The focus in both the common curriculum and the majors will be on learning how to ask the right questions. To make this inquiry-based learning possible, we will teach students in small seminars with a focus on discussion and debate. And we are developing a residential program that will amplify the formal learning in the seminar room or the lab with the more serendipitous—but equally important—learning that takes place in the dining hall, or a study session, or in a club meeting.

After discussion and planning throughout 2009 and 2010, the two universities signed an agreement in early 2011, and my colleagues and I spent the following eighteen months hiring the first 40 faculty of the College. This adventurous group of scholars, in turn, has spent the past academic year devising a curriculum designed to answer the question, “What must a young person learn in order to live a responsible life in this century?” The result, rather than the elective system that dominates much of current US education, is a common curriculum in which students together take a set of innovative courses introducing them to the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Rather than transplant a Yale or US education to Singapore, we are reimagining the liberal arts for a new era and a new global context.

Of course, we each have our own commitment to our particular specialty, but this guiding question has allowed us to come up with an integrated common curriculum, which students will take in the first two years of their education. All students will take modules in each aspect of the common curriculum—this gives them a solid grounding together in the whole range of liberal arts and sciences and prepares them for any major they might like to pursue in their third and fourth years.

It also helps to create the common conversation across campus, as students can discuss the books they are all reading at the same time in their literature classes, or the experiments they are all conducting in their labs, or the social theories they are testing in their course on comparative social institutions, or the ideas they are debating in

philosophy. Whereas most current students in Asia focus exclusively on a single subject, this program emphasizes breadth. It also differs, however, from the typical distribution system in the United States, where breadth is achieved by having the student select courses from various categories—sometimes resulting in students’ deliberately choosing the easiest course in any given category and thus avoiding some of the very breadth the system is meant to encourage.

In April 2013, the Curriculum Committee planning this educational program, chaired by Yale Political Scientist Bryan Garsten, published a report entitled “Yale-NUS College: A new community of learning.” The major themes of our past year’s planning for the college are summarized in a statement of the vision for the program adopted by the faculty, staff, and governing board in September, 2012:

A community of learning.
Founded by two great universities,
In Asia, for the world.

A community of learning is a phrase from the history of the US liberal arts college that emphasizes the sense of shared purpose in a small college and particularly the sense that learning pervades the college, not just in the formal curriculum but also in informal and extra-curricular activities. The faculty as well as the students are devoted to continual learning, and one of the distinctive features of our curriculum is that it requires faculty members to extend their reach outside their own disciplines and teach in interdisciplinary teams.

Broadly speaking, we seek through our curricular and extra-curricular activities the following goals: an ambitious linking of living and learning designed so that conversations began in the classroom flow out into the rest of college life; an encouragement of civic engagement in the form of service off-campus as well as leadership of clubs and societies on campus; a college permeated by the arts so that students appreciate and themselves create music, visual art, film, theater; the encouragement of creativity and curiosity; and a sense of community among the students, staff, and faculty.

Founded By Two Great Universities

Ours is a fairly unique model in that we have developed the college as a partnership between two great universities. Yale and the National University of Singapore both have their roots in small colleges: Yale College, founded in 1701, and Raffles College, founded in 1928. NUS has grown into a major research university, widely considered one of the best in Asia, and has been extremely innovative in trying to maintain an intimate undergraduate experience through programs like University Town and the University Scholars Programme.

Yale has been a leader in liberal arts education since its founding and has articulated many of the principles of such education in influential reports published in 1828. Yale’s leadership has gradually expanded from being a

regional school for training religious ministers to being a national educational leader in the nineteenth century and an internationally-known research university in the twentieth century. Yale-NUS gives Yale the opportunity to use its expertise in undergraduate education and its reputation in Asia to extend that educational leadership on a global scale. Some critics have suggested that Yale-NUS is nothing more than an exercise in “branding,” but this is far from the case: we are drawing on the expertise and experience of Yale faculty and administrators to work in partnership with Singaporean educators to create a vital new institution. Yale and NUS faculty worked together on all the founding committees, and we continue to draw on our founding institutions’ experiences and networks.

In Asia, for the World

While the common curriculum resembles in some ways the core curricula at such US institutions as the University of Chicago or Columbia, it is understood much more broadly in a few respects: firstly, the students focus not only on the “great books” (although they will read those too), but also on a range of knowledge in science, social science, and quantitative reasoning, including the interpretation of large amounts of data. Whether or not a student goes on to major in science, she will have direct exposure to current scientific debates and will have experience with real research in labs or in the field. Secondly, the entire curriculum is designed around the fact of our location in Asia, so that in literature and humanities, for example, we read classics of the Western tradition in conversation with Asian classics, and in an introductory course on the social sciences we pay particular attention to the multitude of social institutions in Asia and how they compare with those in the West.

While we are conscious of educating our students in Asia, we also feel that we are educating them for life in an interconnected world. The late CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs, advocated for the value of a liberal arts education: “We’re not just a tech company...it’s the marriage of technology plus the humanities and the liberal arts that distinguishes Apple.” Likewise, Norm Augustine, former CEO of Lockheed Martin and former undersecretary of the Army, has argued that an education in history is particularly important not just for critical thinking and research skills but also to be able to understand other cultures and one’s own

and to make judgments about the future. These are among many business leaders who recognize the contribution of liberal education to developing young people not only into skilled workers but also into global citizens capable of leadership in a complex and interdependent world.

The Ivy League and other major private research universities continue to provide intensive liberal arts education of the kind I have described, but it is expensive, and only a few institutions are able to meet the full need of all admitted students for financial aid. The traditional liberal arts colleges like Wellesley, Amherst, Swarthmore, and Pomona reach only a tiny fraction of the population.



A mockup shows the main entry gate of Yale-NUS College, which has been in planning since 2009. The college is designed around a liberal arts curriculum that emphasizes multidisciplinary learning.

The great public universities, which in the past aimed to provide a similar kind of education at a much lower price, have suffered from underinvestment by state governments.

There is pressure everywhere for education to be more technically or vocationally focused. But I believe that the US educational system has been so successful because it allows students the freedom to study broadly, it educates them not just in technical or vocational skills, but in creative thinking and active learning, and it provides a strong sense of community at a time in students’ lives when they are trying to discover themselves and imagine their futures.

During the last generation, the United States looked over its shoulder at the rapid economic and political rise of Asia. Now, Asians are seeing value in an educational system that some US citizens have questioned. The United States should take inspiration from the new Asian attention to liberal arts as an opportunity to renew and reinvigorate its own educational traditions. ■