

How new NUS College in Singapore can build on the past

Aspects of the liberal arts tradition of its predecessor, Yale-NUS College, could provide a useful legacy. A former student points to three areas.

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The shadow of Yale-NUS College continues to linger over the entity formed from [its merger with the University Scholars Programme \(USP\)](#), even as moves continue apace with forming the new college and stamping its identity.

Just this month, the name of the new college was announced - NUS College - along with [the appointment of Professor Simon Chesterman as its inaugural dean](#).

Yet some might think the dust has still to fully settle over the merger. After all, when it was announced last year, with the Ministry of Education declaring that it was part of the "road map to more interdisciplinary learning", [many within Yale-NUS College criticised the merger](#) as "a breach of trust", "top-down" and "damaging to Singapore's entire higher educational landscape".

However, with this new beginning, as a former Yale-NUS College student, I would like to take stock and look ahead with optimism.

To put matters in perspective, if we surveyed the world's top colleges that have enjoyed centuries of tradition, we would realise that they also come from humbler origins. More importantly, they too had to evolve.

Take two of America's top universities, Yale and Harvard.

Before Yale University was established, it was known as the Collegiate School. The founders meant for the school to train ministers and lay religious leaders for Connecticut. Before Harvard University was established, it was known as the Harvard College, designed to train congregational clergy.

Today, these two universities have emerged as prestigious seats of learning. Students, from Singapore to South Africa, compete intensely to enrol in these historic universities.

There is a lesson for Singapore in this: Yale-NUS College may cease to be, but it can be regarded as leaving a useful legacy. However, this is contingent on the efficacy of the NUS College in sustaining and building on the liberal arts tradition. There are three key areas where this tradition may be of use: intellectual exploration, pragmatic idealism and leveraging off its alumni network.

Preserving intellectual exploration

One great virtue of Yale-NUS is its intense dedication to rigorous, intellectual exploration. The school constantly encourages students to venture beyond their comfort zones and pursue intellectual interests that, to the uninitiated, may seem impractical.

The drive for exploration reflects the liberal arts culture of challenging conventional wisdom and assumptions. Students are encouraged to deconstruct the prevailing dichotomy between "useful" and "useless" subjects.

Deeming something seemingly useless could often be a product of uninspired thinking that regards certain abstract disciplines as ineffective. Students were taught that with sufficient creativity and experimentation, abstract skills derived from "impractical subjects" can yield much.

The liberal arts tradition of questioning the status quo will, as veteran diplomat Kishore Mahbubani puts it, "prepare Singapore for an uncertain world" and cultivate a fertile breeding ground for innovation.

Indeed, American author Walter Isaacson's book *Steve Jobs* mentions how the Apple founder attended a calligraphy class out of curiosity, and that this helped form his philosophy of marrying technology to the arts.

Mr Jobs is said to have remarked that the best typography was "beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture". This epiphany would serve as his inspiration when he created the world's first computer with beautiful typography - the Macintosh.

Mr Jobs challenged the common assumption that the arts were irrelevant in the world of technology. He insisted that "it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing". Today, Apple's status as one of the world's most innovative and valuable companies continues to prove that Mr Jobs was right.

If we want Singapore to remain a thriving and dynamic economy, with the Steve Jobs of tomorrow coming from this little red dot, NUS College will do Singapore a great deal of good by preserving the tradition of intellectual exploration.

Promoting pragmatic idealism

However, if one was to challenge every single assumption and deconstruct every aspect of life, discourse would become untenable and life rapidly regress towards absurdity.

The emergence of a militant "woke" culture in certain elite American universities shows how deconstruction, taken to the extreme, can be destabilising rather than healthy. Thus, critics often argue forcefully that within the liberal arts, dogmatic left-wing, liberal ideological positions often masquerade as objective, critical thinking.

Regardless of the veracity of this, such a perception has percolated into Singaporean society.

There is a stereotype of Yale-NUS students as "social justice warriors" engaging in performative activism for the sake of virtue-signalling, while enjoying the privilege of living in isolated ivory towers. However, this characterisation is inaccurate.

Many Yale-NUS College students are idealists who genuinely believe they can help create a more just and equitable world.

As a former student, I believe our unbridled idealism might be the cause of this misperception. Many idealists believe that by demonstrating their unyielding spirit, reality will bend to their will.

Similarly, in Yale-NUS College, when faced with an intractable problem, some believe that by protesting and petitioning, we can will our way to a better world. To many onlookers, however, such acts may present us as spoilt and entitled. To prevent a similar problem emerging in the NUS College, it is essential to moderate the idealist disposition of incoming students. One way would be to promote a strong sense of pragmatic idealism.

In the words of former US president Franklin D. Roosevelt, "in striving for a lofty ideal we must use practical methods; and if we cannot attain all at one leap, we must advance towards it step by step, reasonably content so long as we do actually make some progress in the right direction".

A simple suggestion to cultivate this pragmatic idealism is for each student to commit to volunteering at a non-governmental organisation of their choice for two years.

As an active volunteer, I can say confidently that this experience will reveal to the students the paradox of social change - much is demanded for incremental change, yet this incremental change can matter much.

Yale-NUS role in alumni network

In return for the transformative experience of attending university, alumni contribute to the improvement of the school. They provide valuable information, mentorship, networking, job opportunities and financial assistance.

At the same time, the alumni network remains a platform for them to maintain old friendships, build new ones and keep the school spirit alive.

The vibrancy of the alumni associations within Singapore serves as a testament to the enduring camaraderie local universities enjoy.

Throughout the pandemic, alumni from Singaporean universities organised in-person and Zoom reunions from Jakarta to Melbourne. They also organised beach clean-ups, meal and donation drives, workshops, fireside chats and panel discussions to provide career guidance for young graduates and students.

For NUS College to be a truly exceptional college, it would require an alumni network dedicated to championing the liberal arts tradition while contributing to its college and society.

Given the circumstances in which NUS College was born, it behoves the administration to actively build on the University Scholars Programme and Yale-NUS alumni networks.

This move will create a win-win situation. By giving Yale-NUS alumni a significant role in building up NUS College, it would assuage their fears that the legacy of their college would be erased, and so smooth the transition.

It would also allow former Yale-NUS and USP students to jointly contribute to creating a college that would surpass its predecessors.

Most importantly, it will assure the incoming batch of NUS College students that it will enjoy the spirited support of their graduated seniors.

In 2035, on the 10th anniversary of a full NUS College, I hope that we will see former Yale-NUS and USP students readily celebrate our unique pasts and joint legacy together.