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Singapore Wants Education System to Match 'Changing Nature of the World'



Tan Chorh Chuan

By Karin Fischer
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Tan Chorh Chuan has a rule: Every week he reserves a few uninterrupted hours to paint or sketch.

It's fitting that the man who helped bring the liberal arts to Singapore should be kind of an embodiment of the liberal arts himself. Dr. Tan, president of the National University of Singapore, is a physician by training, recognized for his work fighting SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome. And he loves to travel.

In a conversation with The Chronicle, Dr. Tan talked about international engagement and Yale-NUS College, the new liberal-arts institution that his university is building with Yale University. It's one of several deep partnerships that his institution has forged with elite American counterparts, including Duke University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University.

Here are excerpts from the conversation:

Q. Why start a liberal-arts college?

A. Singapore was a British colony, so the education system has British roots, characterized by deep, early specialization. And it still does, in the sense that programs like medicine, law, engineering are undergraduate programs here. But in the last 15 years, a series of very deliberate changes have been made in our educational system, a movement toward greater breadth, greater flexibility. Professional education is still very important, but we need individuals who are better able to deal with complexity, across disciplines, who are able to more readily retool themselves for different kinds of work. That's the changing nature of the world and the changing nature of work.

Q. Why did you seek out a partner, Yale, to create the college instead of going it alone?

A. Working with a partner would allow us to do it much more effectively in the sense that it would take a shorter period of time for us to bring it up to a certain level of distinction. We were also interested in looking for a partner that wasn't going to export a model to us—we wanted to work together to create something different. Because when you start a new college, it's a wonderful opportunity not just to replicate an existing model but to do something different, and hopefully better.

Q. Several foreign institutions, like New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Asia, have recently pulled back from Singapore. Do you worry about the future of your international partnerships?

A. They're different types of relationships. The ones you see here are in deep partnership with a local institution. We are completely committed to the sustainability. If you look at the longevity, our relationship with the Peabody is now into its 12th year. These others are programs where universities have set up largely by themselves here. The world is changing quickly, institutions are changing quickly—we should expect there will be some movement.

Q. How will you know if Yale-NUS has succeeded?

A. As with all universities, what our students actually do when they graduate will be the most important thing. But a few other things that I consider important markers of success: One is what we can learn from this college that will help to improve, enhance, change practices at NUS. I also hope that the college will prove to be an object of study by people from other countries, both in Asia and around the world.