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In Asia, Future Appears Bright for Liberal-Arts Education

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*The following is a guest post by **Pericles Lewis**, president of Yale-NUS College, an autonomous college within the National University of Singapore.*

Last week, I visited Seoul for the first time to participate in a symposium on a unique topic: “The Renaissance of Liberal Studies in Asian Universities.” The event was held at Seoul National University’s College of Liberal Studies, a college with some 600 students and a handful of full-time faculty, founded just three years ago. “The younger the better,” said the university’s president, Yeon-Cheon Oh. For a young program, “there are no obstacles, no established interests.”

But while there was a definite spirit of adventure and idealism at the conference, it was clear that liberal education does face some familiar obstacles in the traditionally highly technical educational systems of East Asia.

At a time when some American institutions seem to be moving away from the liberal-arts model, under pressure for more specialized or vocational education, it is heartening to see that Asian institutions and governments are turning toward liberal-arts and science education. Asian higher education has generally demanded early specialization. But these Asian educators and administrators have realized the importance of a broader sort of education intended to promote flexibility, critical thinking, and acquaintance with broad spans of human knowledge.

Four Korean liberal-studies programs founded in the past decade emphasize students’ preference for holistic admissions and a delayed choice of major in South Korea’s traditionally rigid and exam-based educational system. As one dean from Ewha Womans University put it, they are trying to break the Korean habit of “associating students’ admissions scores with their lifetime intelligence.” There were also participants from liberal-arts and related programs in Japan, mainland China, and Hong Kong. Most participants had spent some time at American universities, and a number had received their Ph.D.’s in the United States, so English was the lingua franca. And everyone loved the Korean restaurants in the Gangnam district.

For the most part, East Asian liberal-studies programs function like honors colleges inside larger universities. As Karin Fischer has noted in [her reporting](#) in *The Chronicle*, most such programs share certain features, such as an emphasis on small classrooms, active learning, broad-based interdisciplinary courses, study abroad, delayed choice of a major, and individual academic advising (which is unusual at most of the universities represented).

The colleges also all face a similar set of challenges. Many Asian students and parents are pragmatic in orientation and doubt the value of liberal studies for future careers. As a result, in programs that allow students to choose their own majors, a large majority go on after the general education of the liberal-studies program to focus on such subjects as economics, business, political science, or pre-medical studies.

Another problem is the expense of educating students in small seminars instead of large lectures. Few of the programs have large numbers of faculty members dedicated to them, so they must rely on faculty on loan from other units within the university. And it is unclear whether teaching in a liberal-arts or general-education program can offer the prestige and monetary rewards of teaching graduate students in a research-intensive program.

Many colleges would like to add residential programs, but few can afford to do so. Hong Kong, however, is [in the midst of switching](#) this year from three-year degrees on the British model to four-year degrees on the American (and Chinese) model and is investing in new residential colleges for the expanded university population.

There was quite a lot of idealism on display at the symposium. While some administrators (and their government sponsors) defend liberal arts in relation to making more creative workers—the next Steve Jobs, for example—one Chinese participant spoke of liberal-arts education as part of self-betterment in a broader sense. His goal, he said, was to “train people to be noble or better persons.” A dean from the University of Tokyo spoke of the need for students to unlearn the rote learning typical of Japanese high schools. Her goal, she said, was to “help students learn how to learn at the university level.”

The symposium ended with a provocative discussion of whether liberal-arts education is ultimately too expensive, whether it leads to dilettantism, whether it really prepares students for careers, and whether in any case American educational models really had much to offer to Asia—subjects that would be all too familiar to beleaguered educators in the United States. Most participants, however, felt that liberal-arts education offers a real alternative to the lecture-based, often rote learning for which Asian educational systems are known.

There is pressure everywhere for education to be more technically or vocationally focused. But I believe, and many leaders of Asian institutions seem to agree, that the American system of liberal-arts education has been 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.

My own experience, as founding president of Yale-NUS College, a partnership between Yale and the National University of Singapore, suggests that Asia has a great hunger for pedagogy that truly encourages critical thinking and a model of liberal-arts and science education adapted for the 21st century. Asian educators are eager to draw on the experiences of American institutions, and I think it is in the interests of both American and Asian institutions for us to contribute what we have learned from the history of American liberal-arts education to the renaissance of liberal studies in Asian universities.

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