

Yale NEWS

Report details fresh take on the liberal arts

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A Yale-NUS College faculty committee has issued a detailed account of the new school's approach to 21st-century liberal arts education, chronicling the evolution of a novel curriculum and offering an insider's view of a major undertaking in global higher education.



Pericles Lewis, president of Yale-NUS College (far right) poses with five members of the inaugural curriculum committee (from left): Rajeev Patke, Yale-NUS College faculty; Bryan Garsten, Yale faculty; Brian Penprase of Pomona College, who helped shape the Yale-NUS science curriculum as an American Council on Education Fellow at Yale; Charles Bailyn, dean of the Faculty for Yale-NUS College; and Jane Jacobs, Yale-NUS College faculty. (Photo by Kimberly Pasko)

Released April 4, the report – “Yale-NUS College: A new community of learning” – marks a milestone in the development of the college and provides a new point of reference for public debate about the future of liberal arts study.

“This report is a record of how one group of scholars who were offered the chance to found a new community of learning saw and approached issues that are fundamental to any college, whether long-established or, like ours, brand new,” the committee writes.

Yale-NUS, a partnership of Yale University and the National University of Singapore (NUS), is a four-year undergraduate residential liberal arts college in Singapore. It opens in August with an inaugural class of 150 students and more than 40 professors.

The report tackles big questions, addressing the value of the liberal arts, what liberal arts students ought to learn, how, and why.

“Our work was the liberal arts experience made manifest,” said Yale-NUS College President Pericles Lewis. “There was a lot of purposeful debate and intellectual ferment. Yale-NUS will be a place of revelatory stimulation, as all great colleges are.”

At a time when Internet-based distance learning and career preparation dominate talk of change in U.S. higher education, the report emphasizes a commitment to residential learning and to exploration of “fundamental questions of human experience.

It also describes major pedagogical reforms enabled by the absence of existing institutional structures and traditions. As the report puts it, “forces resisting change do not exist.”

The first two years of study at Yale-NUS are largely dedicated to a common curriculum – a course of study introducing modes of inquiry, fostering core intellectual skills, and instilling a cosmopolitan worldview and respect for “open, informal and reflective discourse.” In the third year, students pick a major from 14 fields, some familiar (anthropology, history) and many fully interdisciplinary (physical sciences, global affairs, environmental studies). Elements of the common curriculum continue through the fourth year. In place of standard academic departments, there are three broad divisions: humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Instead of one professor per course, there are several. Scholars from related academic fields (biology, chemistry, and physics, for instance) will teach in teams, ensuring genuine interdisciplinary instruction.

“This is a very bold thing,” said committee member Jane M. Jacobs, an urban studies scholar who is director of Yale-NUS's social science division. “We had to do a lot of unlearning before we began relearning, and it's been humbling. It's also been one of the most interesting years of my professional life.

Early groups of Yale and NUS professors established a general framework for the curriculum several years ago. Intensive, detailed work began last August, when the majority of the initial 50-member faculty convened for the first time. These scholars devoted the next nine months to inventing from scratch a complete course of study, a process committee co-chair Rajeev Patke called “one year of sustained excitement.”

The result, he believes, will be a scholastic culture where, formally and informally, “learning is a full-time occupation and preoccupation.”

Early reviewers have noted the report’s potential not only to shape Yale-NUS, but to influence higher education elsewhere.

“Both the project and this report seem to me path-breaking,” said W. Robert Connor, professor emeritus of classics at Princeton University, who also has led both the National Humanities Center and the Teagle Foundation. “I use this over-worked word because I can see that they have thought their way through many of the tangles that impede liberal education in the U.S. today. If so, the future of liberal education here in the U.S. may well be the re-importation of what is now being developed with colleagues in Singapore and elsewhere.”

Yale Law School professor Anthony Kronman, an early adviser to Yale and NUS but not a member of the committee that produced the report, said it expresses “the enduring values of liberal education and the idea of a community of teachers and students gathered in pursuit of that enterprise” and “addresses in considerable detail how those timeless values can be brought to life and given fresh meaning in a context very different from the one in which they originally arose.”

Kronman, the author of “Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life,” added that the report “does an excellent job of tackling certain fundamental questions that have plagued efforts at reform in liberal education generally, in this country and elsewhere.”

The report also describes how Yale-NUS faculty will ensure that the curriculum remains fresh, relevant, and interdisciplinary.

Syllabi for specific Yale-NUS courses will be available online by May. The first day of classes is Aug. 12.

“We’ve tried to be as frank as possible and not claim we have all the answers,” said committee chair Bryan Garsten, a professor of political science at Yale. “But we’ve been thoughtful and we’ve been ambitious, and we’re proud of our work.”