

BN Special : Through the looking-glass at Yale-NUS College

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Earlier on in August this year, Singapore's first liberal arts college, Yale-NUS College, opened its doors to its first batch of students. Established in 2011, the college's students and staff currently make their home in a residential college at University Town, National University of Singapore (UTown, NUS). Breakfast Network visited its premises and interviewed some students and faculty members several weeks ago, to find out how everyone has been settling in.

The other day, I got a peek into the goings-on at Yale-NUS College – an exciting prospect for someone who'd lived in a neighbouring residential college (Tembusu), and particularly because I had previously been keen on studying in a liberal arts college (many years ago, I had applied to Amherst College).

Having been through the Humanities Programme in my JC years, the liberal arts programme did not seem alien to me back then; and now as a former resident of Tembusu College, it's become even less so. Yale-NUS' liberal arts programme brings an interdisciplinary, intercultural approach to studying the arts, sciences, humanities and so on which has to some extent been tested beforehand by programmes like the University Scholars Programme and the UTown Residential Programme in colleges like Tembusu. The good thing about that is, the colleges can learn from each other to improve their respective programmes; the bad thing is they might start to get competitive. Which is why I sincerely hope for a conviviality to be maintained between the colleges.

There's little chance for me now, but I do wonder what it would be like to be a Yale-NUS student.

For a college with zero student groups so far, the 157 first year students have a pretty vibrant student life – they cook, hold parties, sing a cappella, what have you. The culture seems casual and close-knit. Some students put up some big sheets of paper with questions like “What does a liberal arts college mean to you?”, encouraging responses. (Good for them; wait till they get a student committee, and start needing approval for putting posters up around the building.) In the two lessons

I've crashed, they did spontaneous, silly things like each write a word from the first line of Homer's Odyssey behind their evaluation forms which when put together would form the entire sentence, and sit in a “cave” (formed by a circle of tables) reading Plato's Republic out loud until their professor came to class. They sure have a healthy dose of mischief, though they steer clear of delinquency... As far as I could tell.



An interview session was held with Bertha (left) and some professors from Yale-NUS College: Prof Charles Bailyn (opposite Bertha), Dr Kyle Farley (behind Prof Bailyn), and Prof Brian McAdoo (not pictured) (Photo by Shawn Danker)



The main events board in Yale-NUS, and some posters put up by students (Photo by Shawn Danker)

All students undergo a single four-year teaching program, which they call the Common Curriculum, consisting of 10 courses. Courses are multi-disciplinary, ranging from “Current Issues”, “Scientific Inquiry”, to “Philosophy and Political Thought”. Each student will take seven of these courses over two semesters; four in the first and three in the second, plus one elective. In their last two years, students have to choose from 14 courses to major in. Some of the more familiar courses, such as Psychology and Environmental Studies, are on offer, along with others like Anthropology and Urban Studies, which are not currently offered by any of the four main universities. (NUS however does offer a minor in Urban Studies to students.)

One common misconception: Just because it is a liberal arts college doesn't mean it doesn't teach science. Students must all take a two-semester course on the Foundations of Science; except for those intending to major in Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, or Mathematical and Computational Sciences. They will take Integrated Science instead.

Yale-NUS seems like a haven for international students – or students who might find it hard to “fit in” with a Singaporean school culture. For the Singaporeans, the college's establishment came as a stroke of luck to some. Undergraduate Evan Asava Aree said he would have gone abroad for a liberal arts education until he realised that Yale-NUS was opening its doors. Another Singapore-born, Australian-bred student Tara Dear wanted to apply to the National University of Singapore but decided Yale-NUS would be the best of both worlds.

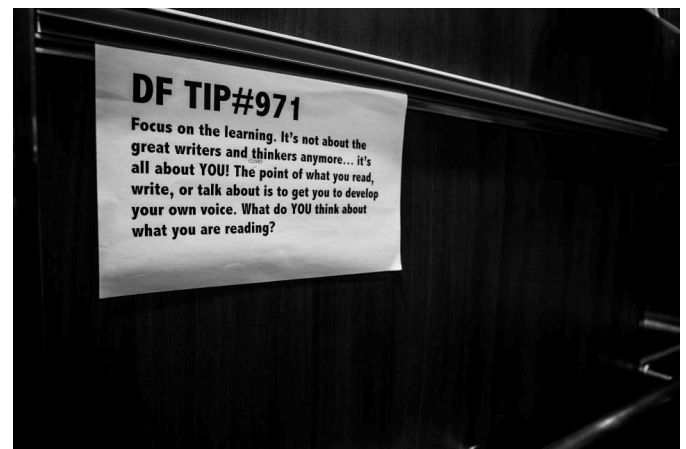


Some Yale-NUS students were present at an interview session held recently (Photo by Shawn Danker)

The mix of locals to foreigners in the school is 60 per cent to 40 per cent, which currently tips the balance more towards Singaporeans; but that doesn't say much about the sort of profile the local students might have. Or, for that matter, the international students. One thing I knew for sure, though – in

the course of a day which I spent talking with students, sitting in on their lessons, and mingling with them in the dining hall, I noticed that everyone I spoke to or heard speak, used Standard English. No *chor lor, ah liantypes* in Yale-NUS; and the boys played soccer but I couldn't imagine them yelling “Referee *kayu!*” across the field.

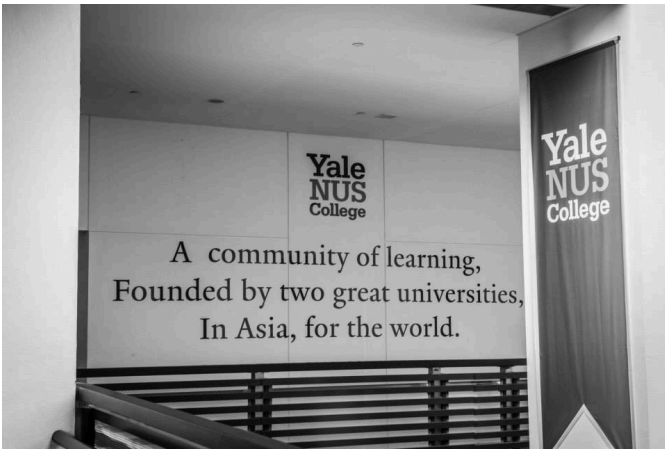
My first impression was this: These students look poised to position themselves globally. In fact, many of them already are, what with mixed parentage making them “partially Singaporean”, having lived and studied overseas for a significant amount of time, etc. They would have cultivated a global outlook... Which makes me wonder what they would have thought of homeboy rapper ShiGGa Shay's hit track, *Limpeh*. (Number one on iTunes Singapore okay, don't pray pray.) Or really, if they'd heard it at all. Such a thing seems so inward-looking; and the Yale-NUS community is certainly outward-looking, with their three week orientation programme in Yale (New Haven) itself, Week Seven projects focusing on the effects of tsunamis in Bandar Aceh, and in-class discussions on gay marriage issues, the subject of worldwide debate of late. Singaporean students would find themselves explaining local terms and cultural icons to their classmates, and professors too... Which, in a way, could also be an avenue for discussing and reflecting on what it means to be Singaporean in a global context.



One of many tips pasted by the Dean's Fellows around the college (Photo by Shawn Danker)

One good thing about the cultural makeup of the community, though, is that these students would never be stuck in the CMIO framework; they should be expected to rise above such arbitrary, executive delimitations. Perspectives, discussions, and hopefully solutions would be shaped by the understanding that there are many cultures co-existing in Singapore, and each has to be understood, not managed. On the flip side, these kids might have trouble knowing whether to turn to Sinda, Mendaki or CDAC if they needed ‘support’, especially financial aid.

The big question on my mind, and surely everyone's: What is Yale-NUS? Professor Charles Bailyn gave the mission as the answer, which is neat, and certainly a respectable motto: "A community of learning, founded by two great universities, in Asia, for the world".



The Yale-NUS motto, outside its main entrance (Photo by Shawn Danker)

But the answer will really surface in how the college positions itself in relation to NUS, and even the other Residential Colleges in UTown; in the kind of lessons teachers are allowed (or required) to plan for the students; and eventually, in how even the students themselves talk about it to other people. That's when the praises will be sung, and the insults will fly. And as the fledgling college is already acutely aware of, it's not an easy road – what with harsh criticism from Yale faculty which passed a resolution for them to uphold, and striking out as an entity independent from both Yale and NUS (they have their own governing board, and their own funding).

Personally, I think Yale-NUS will be very careful about how it positions itself... And being careful is a good thing.