Yale-NUS College: Singapore’s First Liberal Arts College

Yale-NUS is Singapore’s first residential liberal arts college. It seeks to integrate Asian and other global intellectual traditions, with the goal of educating young people for leadership in a complex, interconnected world.

A Yale-NUS College education emphasises broad-based multidisciplinary learning in the full range of arts, humanities, and social and natural sciences. It encompasses a four-year, fully residential undergraduate experience in which students are immersed in a stimulating intellectual setting characterised by small classes and close interaction among students and faculty. All students study a common curriculum which comprises a set of interconnected courses which gives them opportunities to explore themes and topics ranging across all the academic disciplines, from science to the humanities.
This common curriculum is complemented by a co-curricular programme which develops critical inquiry as well as effective communication and leadership skills. This liberal arts experience is designed to prepare students to flourish in virtually any field.

The curriculum at Yale-NUS falls roughly into three parts: the common curriculum (38% of the curriculum), the student’s choice of major (31%) and electives (31%).

Yale-NUS opened in 2013 with 157 students, and the total student population in 2015 was about 500 students from 38 countries. Located at NUS Utown, it provides opportunities for Yale-NUS students to interact with the wider NUS community in sports, the arts and other social activities.

Photos courtesy of Yale-NUS College.

A Flagship Offering: Week 7 Learning Across Boundaries

During Week 7 LABs, students and faculty engage in week-long learning projects that explore themes of the common curriculum outside the traditional classroom. Students and faculty share what they have learned at a symposium at the end of the week. Yale-NUS students have identified Week 7 LABs as one of the highlights of their educational experience, while prospective students have said it was one of the features that attracted them to choose to attend Yale-NUS.

Topics in 2015 included:

Touching the Sky – Mongolia’s Universe of Art and Culture: drawing on Mongolia’s cultural heritage, specifically a strong awareness of the sky, students “touched the sky” with astrophotography and telescopic viewing. They also designed and constructed Aeolian Kites, a 1-stringed instrument played by the wind, producing a sound imitating the whistle-like overtones that occur in khoömii, Mongolia’s throat singing tradition.

Maker Movement – Art and Craft of the New Economy: studying the “maker” movement in Singapore through observing how different “makers” worked, and investigating the “makers culture” to understand its origins, practices, and possible futures. Students also looked at the policy context of the maker movement in Singapore and made comparisons with other countries.

Genomics in the Jungle: combining modern genetic and genomic techniques with field studies of behaviour at the Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre (KBFS) in the Ulu Temburong National Park in Brunei, students engaged in a variety of projects examining biodiversity. The emphasis of the projects was on insect and plant diversity in different habitats, from the dark understorey to high up in the forest canopy.
Liberal arts education has a long history both in Asia and the West. I would like to speak briefly about that history in order to illuminate the way that Yale-NUS embodies some dynamic tensions: between Asia and the West, of course, but also between tradition and modernity, between a classical education and preparedness for the modern world, and between the traditional liberal arts college and the modern research university.

Since classical times in the West, a liberal education has been understood to be the type of learning appropriate for a free citizen. In the ancient world, of course, these citizens were exclusively male and often held slaves, so we should not overlook the aristocratic origins of Western notions of liberal arts. Nonetheless, over time, and notably in the early days of the American republic, liberal arts also became part of an education for democratic citizenship, and even earlier education has always had an element of meritocracy or democracy about it, insofar as it allowed the most talented to rise regardless of rank and connections. This was the motivation behind the great Asian examination systems, and we should not forget that Asia had its own forms of liberal arts education.

For example, the seven liberal arts of medieval Europe comprised the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). No doubt, even in the Middle Ages, learned professors would argue about whether there was too much emphasis on the trivium or the quadrivium in the curriculum, and no doubt even then university administrators had a hard time getting the faculty to agree on curricular reforms.

In China, from the time of Confucius onwards, the six arts that defined a gentleman were rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics. Notably, there is considerable overlap with the West, although the Chinese seem to have prized military accomplishments more highly. In both Asia and the West, what we today think of as sciences were part of the liberal arts from the beginning.

I think that the purpose of our Common Curriculum is quite different from that of 19th-century Yale College. We have asked the question "What must a young person learn in order to lead a responsible life in this century?" Our Common Curriculum is our answer to that question, for this time and place, and we recognise that the answer in a different college might be different. But more importantly, we expect that our students will specialise—we just want them to specialise a year or two later than they do elsewhere. Specifically, we are trying to reset the balance between the disciplines that were mostly founded in the 19th century and that are the central organising principle of most modern research universities, and the broad learning that we think, even today, will form the best basis for a student’s future encounters with the world.
The rise of Liberal Arts in Singapore

Although not liberal arts universities per se, other universities in Singapore have moved away from the traditional focus on the knowledge required for just one discipline or profession. Students are now required to include courses which provide them with knowledge and abilities which are more generally applicable, to develop critical thinking and expression and also quantitative reasoning skills, irrespective of their major.

### Students in the University Scholars' Programme

Students in the University Scholars' Programme are required to read 12 USP modules (48 modular credits) in place of the general education modules and other electives. They do 30% of their academic work with USP, and 70% in their home faculty. The USP modules are in categories such as:

- Writing & critical thinking
- Quantitative reasoning
- Humanities & social sciences
- Sciences & technologies

### SMU

Students are required to take 16 modules in 8 clusters (over 40% of the total curriculum) which include foundation and general education courses as well as courses in areas such as Asian studies, global studies, technology and entrepreneurship.

### NTU USP

Students take at least 30% of their courses from fields other than their main discipline. Three core modules are taken by all students:

- Communication skills
- Singapore studies
- Environmental sustainability

Students may choose other courses from among 35 modules outside their discipline such as in business management, humanities and social sciences, technology and society, liberal studies and others.

### NUS USP

Students in the University Scholars' Programme are required to take four core courses and five elective courses which replace various general education requirements. The core courses are:

- Writing and reasoning
- Ethics
- Quantitative reasoning
- Fieldwork & documentation

Elective courses may be chosen from the following categories:

- Arts, humanities, & culture
- Science, technology, & society

### NTU USP

Students are required to take seven courses in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) to provide them with skills in inquiry, analysis, interpretation and presentation. The core courses are:

- World texts & interpretations
- Theorizing the self, culture and society

Other courses are chosen from a common pool of HASS electives.