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# The Rise Of Liberal Arts Colleges In Asia

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One of the most heated debates in education today concerns the liberal arts model. It has come under fire in recent years, and has been increasingly compared to STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) learning. The rapid introduction of new technologies which require field specialization are, many argue, outdating subjects such as philosophy and literature. In this digital universe, the idea of a liberal arts education has become the academic equivalent of vinyl records.

Critics argue that the highly specialized and sought-after STEM degrees, such as informatics, robotics, or laser technology, have presented a preferred alternative to a liberal arts education. With globalization, skills in STEM subjects have become a necessity in today's job market.

In recent years, however, a revival of the liberal arts model may be coming from a most unlikely place: Asia. While the future of small liberal arts colleges in the U.S., many seeing anemic funding and attendance rates, looks tenuous, in recent years, educators and administrators in countries like China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are focusing on schools which focus on critical thinking and creativity. While Asian students continue to stream into U.S. colleges – Chinese students alone account for nearly 30% of all foreign students in the country – there is a “gradual liberal arts switch happening,” says David Kim, CEO of C2 Education, a tutoring and test preparation service with 150 centers nationwide and based in Atlanta, GA.

“Just as the U.S. begins to move away from traditional liberal arts programs and turn to specialized online programs, Asia is discovering there is benefit in the creativity and well-rounded perspective that comes from a liberal arts education,” says Chester Goad, Ph.D., who sits on the editorial review board for the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*. “Seeking to break away from their own traditionally homogenized and rigidly specialized educational system, Asian countries began in recent years to find inspiration from our system.”

This is an interesting twist, he points out, since for years, some American politicians have pointed to Asia's specialized educational systems as a potentially more effective system of learning.

### [Top 10 Asian Liberal Arts Colleges](#)

#### **Radical Experiment**

In the last decade, liberal-studies programs have popped up in China, Japan, and South Korea, although the total number of liberal arts institutions in the region is still tiny compared with Asian institutions which demand early specialization in a specific field. The creation of [Yale-NUS](#) in 2011 is a prime example of the experiment to see whether an American style liberal arts model can survive abroad. This pioneering partnership between Yale University and the National University of Singapore is a separate liberal arts college within the larger National University of Singapore campus.

Not only is Yale the first Ivy League school to have a college bearing its name in Asia, Yale-NUS is the first liberal arts college in all of Singapore. It offers 14 majors, a four year residential program, and two years of common curriculum courses. Yale-NUS adopts a slightly newer approach to the traditional liberal arts focus by incorporating several STEM courses into its learning curriculum. Now, two years after welcoming its first class of students, the college is set to complete expansion plans for its new permanent campus, which will open next month. The student body population also continues to grow towards the targeted goal of 1,000 students.

Jessica Teng, a current student at Yale-NUS, describes her school as a “daring endeavor that actually brings an American liberal arts education to our shores while keeping a strong focus on Asian literature and philosophy.” A native of Singapore, she is a double-degree student in Law and Liberal Arts, a program which allows her to pursue a professional degree while also having a liberal arts foundation.

“Unlike in the United States, liberal arts is a completely unfamiliar concept to many Singaporeans,” she says. “It’s difficult to explain how radical Yale-NUS’ introduction of a liberal arts education really is because until recently, most Singaporean universities have always focused on specialized tracks.”

Yale is not the only big name to start programs in Asia however – Duke University recently started a partnership with Wuhan University in China. The collaboration, described as “Liberal Education Meets Chinese Tradition,” resulted in the creation of [Duke Kunshan University](#), which welcomed its first students in August, 2014.

Additionally, NYU established a partnership with East China Normal University in 2013 to form NYU-Shanghai, the third degree-granting campus in NYU's global network. It is the first Sino-U.S. joint venture, and adopts a liberal arts curriculum with classes conducted in English.

In South Korea, [Seoul National University](#)'s College of Liberal Studies serves as another model for this new kind of undergraduate education. Founded in 2009, it emphasizes students' preference for holistic admissions and delayed choice of major as opposed to the traditionally strict and exam-based South Korean educational system.

SNU's College of Liberal Studies hosted an international symposium for the other liberal arts colleges in Asia in October 2012, entitled "The Renaissance of Liberal Studies in Asian Universities." Besides the representatives from Yale-NUS, also present at the symposium were members of [The University of Tokyo](#), whose College of Arts and Sciences is another successfully implemented liberal education model. Among the schools at the conference, the institutions with emerging liberal programs were [The Chinese University of Hong Kong](#), [Kyung Hee University](#) (College of Humanities), [Waseda University](#) (School of International Liberal Studies), and [Ewha Womans University](#) (Scranton College).

For the most part, many of the colleges share certain features and face the same challenges. Typically, East Asian liberal-studies programs function like honors colleges inside larger universities. They all similarly share an emphasis on small classes, individual advising, broad-based interdisciplinary courses, and a delayed choice of major, among others. Many traditional parents, however, doubt the career values of liberal studies. Another issue is the expense. Educating students in small seminars requires large numbers of faculty on the payroll, and adding residential programs also contributes to financial strain.

### **Importing the Soft Power of Liberal Arts**

This gradual introduction of liberal education into Asia can accomplish other goals besides the diversification of teaching models. Besides challenging the traditional focus on STEM subjects and rigorous testing, the liberal arts model in Asia facilitates the spread of American and Western ideas into regions with strict regimes and different governments. Ever since plans for Yale-NUS were first announced, concerns arose about how Singapore, an authoritarian democracy, could uphold the values of a liberal arts education. The project was criticized by members of the Yale faculty and alumni wary of the lack of political freedom, who argued that restrictions to free speech and

expression would have a negative impact on the rights of Yale-NUS students. According to a 2015 report by Reporters Without Borders, Singapore ranked 153 out of 180 countries evaluated for press freedoms.

“The discourse that takes place in Yale-NUS between the student body and the administration, or even within the student body, is something that rarely happens anywhere else in Singapore,” says Teng. Students are able to express their opinions about controversial sexual or political issues, from posters that students put up on their walls, as well as the formation of a LGBTQ –rights group. Teng believes that this degree of academic freedom is “due to the liberal arts and the American ideal of free speech.”

From a U.S. foreign policy perspective, introducing liberal education programs in places like Asia are “investments in soft power values that might or might not make the rest of the world want what the United States wants,” [argues Daniel Drezner in \*Foreign Policy\*](#). Indeed, the spread of U.S. higher education is significantly linked with liberal internationalism. Introducing the education model of the United States into other countries can lead to a spread of ideas and potential reform.

Whatever the result, it will undoubtedly be “interesting to see how a more Westernized liberal arts education is received in Asia.” says Goad.

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