

Can liberal arts thrive in China? One college suggests they can

Despite holding its own at Peking University, Yuanpei College still encounters resistance to its approach, professor says

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As a new president takes the helm at Peking University (PKU), its liberal arts college is arguably on the firmest footing

in its history. The college has a long tradition of experimental programs with the country's leading institutions, including Tsinghua University, Tsinghua University



fully-fledged liberal arts school with more than 1,200 students, drawing the cream of the crop from applicants to its parent institution.

"Yuanpei has become the most popular college in PKU. Every year we have the best students from the whole country. PKU and Tsinghua have best students, but we have the best of the best," said

Feyu Sun, its associate dean. Yuanpei will win competition among Chinese graduates higher than any people – even academics – of the value of its liberal arts education uphill battle.

Some of the presidents of PKU were from the background of science and technology, and they needed to 'earn' our support from the administration. Some of them said that Yuanpei is important because it is not a narrow, even if it is a narrow

college. After our years of rigorous exam preparation, we have a very good foundation to work with a more widely defined curriculum. It is a very good foundation for the liberal arts.



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By design, the college doesn't have its own professors, a decision that still sometimes puts it in tension with the broader faculty at PKU, some of whom see Yuanpei students as lacking an commitment to a discipline and competing for limited resources with the students inside their own departments.

"This gave us a lot of challenges in the beginning because students and professors from other departments didn't want students from Yuanpei," Professor Sun said.

Since then, the students' performance in their classes has helped shift the dial, convincing reluctant professors "that a student not picking any major in beginning and who could change major or without any restriction could perform even better than those students who study professional knowledge from the beginning", said Professor Sun.

He credits Yuanpei's students' drive, which stems from a true interest in the subjects they eventually settle on.

"In China many students come to university to study economics or business because it was their parents' decision. Students study that major but don't like it," he said. "If Yuanpei students choose a major, they choose it by their own will...in Yuanpei, you truly love that major."

Getting to this juncture, though, isn't always easy. Unlike the most university students, who pick a department and simply follow the curriculum, Yuanpei students must select their own courses – something most struggle to do.

"Students in Yuanpei are really good, passionate, ambitious [and] know what they're doing, but some come to Yuanpei just because their studies were good in high school, not because they know what they want to study in university," he said.

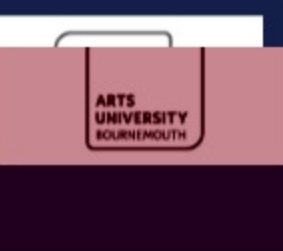
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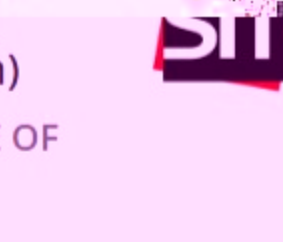
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But as the university set out to gain new students, it has never before, convincing many students to re-evaluate their choices.

"In the past 20 years, most of our students have been in science and technology, so we need to attract more students in the liberal arts."

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