

# The Rise & Restructuring of Yale-NUS College: An International Liberal Arts Partnership in Singapore

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*Yale University and the National University of Singapore (NUS) agreed in 2011 to open Yale-NUS College, an autonomous liberal arts college within NUS. As the College's first president, I recount in this essay some of the successes and challenges of creating the College, which opened in 2013, and the decision of NUS in 2021 to end the partnership as of 2025. I analyze the College's educational offerings, the political controversies surrounding its establishment and eventual closure, the finances of a small-scale, elite college within a large public university, and the broad social changes that contributed to the College's fate.*

**A**t the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2009, the president of the National University of Singapore (NUS) approached the president of Yale University with an intriguing proposition. Singapore was interested in founding a new college, along the lines of leading American liberal arts colleges, to encourage innovative and interdisciplinary learning. Yale President Richard C. Levin had a strong interest in the rise of universities in Asia and, at Yale's tercentennial in 2001, had committed the Ivy League university to a global future. NUS President Tan Chorh Chuan, a physician and educator noted as the mastermind of Singapore's successful response to the 2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic, had long fostered an interest in sponsoring active, creative learning among Singaporean youth. This ambition coincided with the government of Singapore's enthusiasm about making the island nation a hub of regional, or global, education. After two years of negotiations, the two universities signed an agreement to open Yale-NUS College ("Yale-NUS" or "the College"), an autonomous college within the National University of Singapore. On July 1, 2012, I became the College's first president.

Yale-NUS opened in 2013 and thrived across most dimensions: an innovative curriculum spanning Asian and Western content, a state-of-the-art campus designed as a community of learning with top students, dedicated faculty, and successful graduates. It was therefore a disappointment eight years later, in the

summer of 2021, when NUS announced that Yale's name would be removed from the College, and that it would be merged with NUS's University Scholars Program to become NUS College. NUS College has since admitted its first students and Yale-NUS remains open until June 2025, when most students admitted in 2021 will have graduated. It is timely, however, to undertake an analysis of the successes and challenges experienced during Yale-NUS College's twelve years educating almost two thousand students from around the world and exploring the possibilities for a cross-cultural form of liberal education.

This essay focuses on the ambitions of both the National University of Singapore and Yale University in launching the collaboration, the successful innovations undertaken during the initial years of Yale-NUS, and some of the factors that contributed to its merger with NUS's University Scholars Program. I will delve specifically into the educational offerings of Yale-NUS, the political controversies surrounding its founding and eventual closure, the finances of a small-scale, elite college within a large public university, and the broad social changes that contributed to the College's fate. The closure of the College was overdetermined. Primary among its many causes was the rise of nationalism and populism since 2012. As a former president and current member of the Governing Board of Yale-NUS, and as dean of Yale College, I must respect a duty of confidentiality, so I refer in this essay only to matters of public record, but I hope that my analysis of this successful if short-lived experiment will be useful to educators and administrators who attempt innovations in international education in the years to come.

**T**he original idea for creating a liberal arts college in Singapore came in a 2007 report from an international committee advising the Singaporean government on educational policy. It proposed that Singapore, which has traditionally had a very strong but rather specialized form of higher education developed out of the British Commonwealth tradition, should introduce liberal arts education loosely based on the U.S. model. It seems the committee originally envisioned a small, independent liberal arts college similar to Amherst, Swarthmore, or Pomona, but Yale-NUS resulted from a joint venture between two leading universities. (The NUS's discussions in 2008 with the Claremont Colleges did not come to fruition.) The Singaporean Ministry of Education decided to house the College within the National University of Singapore, its flagship university. NUS itself had evolved during the twentieth century from the 1949 merger of the Edward VII Medical School with Raffles College, the first undergraduate institution in the arts and sciences in Singapore, which had opened in 1928 with forty-three students. Some of my older colleagues in Singapore thought of Yale-NUS College as a rebirth of the intimate form of education enjoyed in the early days of NUS, which had subsequently grown to almost forty thousand students, not much smaller than the University of Michigan.

Liberal arts education differs from specialized forms of education in several ways. The most obvious difference is that it has broader academic requirements. Students spend at least some time studying material from the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and natural sciences, rather than focusing exclusively on a single major subject. In general, students choose their majors only after a year or two of such broad education. The subjects taught in liberal arts colleges are not seen primarily as preparation for a specific career, although this has changed over time as vocational pressures have increased. Typically, though, the focus remains on the traditional arts and sciences rather than business, law, medicine, or engineering. In the American tradition, liberal arts education also emphasizes active learning, often in small seminars under the guidance of a professor, where students discuss and debate the subjects they are studying, rather than listen passively to lectures in large amphitheaters. Finally, since colonial times in the United States, there has been a long tradition of residential education at liberal arts colleges, and at larger universities drawing on this norm. That is, students spend most of their undergraduate years living on or near campus, usually far from their families, where they learn from their peers not only in class but in the sports, clubs, societies, musical groups, and student publications that create a lively civil society in parallel with the official curriculum taught by the professors.

Many affluent Singaporeans have sent their children abroad to study in American liberal arts colleges and universities. Other students have earned scholarships to such institutions. Some stay abroad after graduating. Singapore has traditionally sought ways to retain many of its brightest students rather than lose them to the international job market. The establishment of a liberal arts college promised to enhance innovation, offer local students an attractive option at a relatively low cost, retain talent, and perhaps shake up the traditional pedagogical approaches of Singapore's existing universities. Subsequently, in 2021, NUS would open the College of Humanities and Sciences, a larger-scale effort involving joint offerings from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science. Elements of this design drew on the Yale-NUS experience.

What did Yale see in this venture? Yale has long been a leader in undergraduate education, and the 1828 Yale Reports provided an influential defense of liberal arts education in particular.<sup>1</sup> President Levin had made the internationalization of Yale a hallmark of his presidency, and Yale has an especially long history in Asia. In Changsha, Hunan Province, China, a leading medical school and high school remain as testaments to Yale's experiments with international education in the early part of the twentieth century. A prospectus from President Levin and Provost Peter Salovey made the case for the venture to the Yale community in September 2010. The founding of Yale-NUS College gave Yale the opportunity to experiment with new modes of liberal education, appropriate to the twenty-first century, that extended the university's international reputation by reaching

students who could not be served in New Haven, Connecticut, and influencing the development of higher education in Asia. The Singaporean government provided generous funding, all of which was invested directly in the establishment of the College. Over one hundred Yale faculty participated in the planning and implementation of the curriculum, and in the hiring of the dedicated Yale-NUS faculty who would hold tenure-track positions at NUS.

**A**lthough I was not involved in the initial planning for Yale-NUS, in the September 2010 prospectus, I was introduced as the potential chair of the committee that would recruit the new humanities faculty for the College. During the following eighteen months, I became increasingly involved in thinking through the implementation of the plans, and in speaking on behalf of the project when controversies arose. In May 2012, I was introduced as the College's founding president. Those of us most involved in the implementation of NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan's and Yale president Levin's vision included Yale vice president Linda Lorimer, NUS vice president Lily Kong (now president of Singapore Management University), Yale astronomer Charles Bailyn (who became the College's founding dean of faculty), NUS physicist Lai Choy Heng (who became the first provost of Yale-NUS), NUS historian Tan Tai Yong (who later became the College's second president), and Doris Sohmen-Pao, an experienced educational administrator who was recruited to serve as the College's executive vice president for administration. There was a strong sense of excitement among those who committed themselves to this well-resourced and ambitious educational start-up.<sup>2</sup>

The innovations introduced by Yale-NUS spanned its curriculum, cocurricular offerings, faculty organization, and residential student life. The initial plans for the curriculum, outlined by a joint faculty committee in 2009, revolved around a core program in which first-year students took six shared courses on great books from both Asia and the West. Although partly inspired by Yale's optional Directed Studies program, this core curriculum would be required of all students in the College. In this regard, it resembled the core curricula at Columbia University and the University of Chicago more than it did the broader distributional system for general education pursued by most students at Yale College. While courses in science and social issues were envisioned as part of the initial committee's report, the plans for the curriculum eventually widened across a few dimensions. Later faculty groups added required courses on social institutions, quantitative reasoning, and scientific inquiry, resulting in a common curriculum of about ten courses.<sup>3</sup> While the initial common curriculum continued to heavily emphasize the classical works of European and Asian civilizations, over time, the faculty added more attention to modern works, contemporary social thought, and cultures other than China, India, Greece, and Rome. As the spokesperson for Yale-NUS, I encapsulated our ambition in the question: "What must a young person learn in order to

lead a responsible life in this century?” If I were asked to develop a common curriculum today, I would give greater weight to data science and economics. Nonetheless, the experience of reading challenging books together, and collectively solving formidable problems in science or statistics, succeeded admirably. Students developed a shared vocabulary (including a set of inside jokes) and a love of learning that I think would have been hard to inspire with a less unified curriculum. The faculty hired to design and teach the curriculum came from top liberal arts colleges and research institutions worldwide, often moved their families to Singapore, and built not only the educational program but also the distinctive campus culture.

Central to this education was the fact that it took place in a shared residential setting on a beautiful campus designed by former Yale School of Architecture dean César Pelli and his team at Pelli Clarke & Partners, along with Forum Architects of Singapore. Liberal education thrives in a residential environment, and I worked with the faculty, staff, and students to articulate the vision of the College as “A community of learning, / Founded by two great universities, / In Asia, for the world.” A committee chaired by Yale political scientist Bryan Garsten and NUS literature professor Rajeev Patke outlined the ambitions of the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> During the planning year (2012–2013), several young Singaporean men who had completed their compulsory military service and planned to enroll joined the team. Faculty, staff, and future students worked together in a temporary location (“Residential College 4”) to build a culture and prepare for the arrival of our first students. The strong sense of community engagement throughout Yale-NUS helped the College attract outstanding students and faculty. The inaugural class of about one hundred sixty students came from across the globe with outstanding academic credentials and pioneering spirits. Generous financial aid from NUS, coupled with Yale’s recruiting network, allowed us to admit not only students from the region but also from all continents except Antarctica. A colleague visiting from New Haven during the first year after the College formally opened (academic year 2013–2014) borrowed an expression from sociologist Émile Durkheim and commented on the “collective effervescence” of the place. People felt that they were engaged in a great endeavor, and even the crises weathered during the start-up phase tended to strengthen our community and its devotion to creating a distinct educational model that we hoped would inspire others in Asia and beyond.

Among the innovations of the early years was an experiential education program called Week Seven, in which all first-year students participated in off-campus study trips led by faculty members. These ranged as far afield as England, Greece, and Japan, but most took place in Southeast Asia. The intensive study of a topic on site inspired students and attracted attention from potential applicants. Some of the themes included disaster relief in Indonesia, biodiversity in Singapore, global finance in Hong Kong, and World War II memorials in locations such as Auschwitz. A later proposal for a Week Seven project on political protest caused

considerable disquiet in 2019, but the experiential nature of the projects took students and faculty beyond the potential bookishness of the intense curriculum. In its later years, particularly under the current leadership of President Joanne Roberts, the College strengthened faculty mentorship, developed an innovative residential education program, enhanced the curriculum, and became a leader in re-thinking approaches to sexual misconduct on Singaporean campuses.

The faculty attracted to such an experimental college were themselves a remarkable group of established scholars and recent graduates of top PhD programs. Often coming from leading research universities or American liberal arts colleges, these colleagues sought a unified academic life that combined research, intensive work with undergraduates in the classroom, and college service. The College innovated in its administrative approach by organizing faculty according to their academic division (science, social sciences, humanities) rather than their department. We recruited faculty in large collaborative workshops rather than through the traditional campus visit that typically focuses on a job talk. Faculty were eligible for tenure-track positions in the National University of Singapore, and eventually about two-thirds of the initial assistant professors who stayed with the College earned tenure.

There were, however, several challenges concerning faculty development. The demands of starting a new college often impeded assistant and associate professors' progress on their own research. Yale faculty involved in the tenure process, including myself, tended to look for a good balance of teaching excellence with high-quality research (though not necessarily a high quantity of research). Those senior faculty who came from independent American liberal arts colleges often thought that the College over-emphasized research accomplishment. The National University of Singapore valued its high standing in research, and Yale-NUS faculty were employed by NUS, not Yale. Over time, working closely with the leadership of NUS, the College came to define rigorous tenure standards. Given the fact that both parent universities were research intensive, the research expectations were high and ran the risk of interfering with the junior faculty's dedication to teaching. This was particularly true in the sciences, where the Yale-NUS teaching load was heavy, and research funding was low, compared to the parent institutions. Faculty who stayed at Yale-NUS tended to have an unusual degree of commitment to the College's mission, but morale problems persisted due to high standards for tenure. For some, the tension between teaching and research spoke to the College's identity crisis.

During the decade in which I presented the outcomes of the Yale-NUS effort to public audiences, and to trustees at Yale and the National University of Singapore, our results continually exceeded expectations. Applications for admission massively outnumbered spots in each entering class, and students frequently turned down leading colleges and universities to enroll at Yale-NUS. The College was one

of the ten to twenty most selective undergraduate institutions in the English-speaking world. Faculty continued to come from top PhD programs and departments. Those who left often advanced to jobs at premiere universities such as Princeton or Oxford. The curriculum and residential life received excellent reviews from students and parents. Graduates went on to jobs with leading multinational companies in Singapore and abroad, to posts in the Singaporean civil service, and to prestigious graduate schools. Three won Rhodes Scholarships to Oxford. Interest in the College's program brought visiting administrators and government officials to campus not only from Asia and the United States but also from Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The founding of the Alliance of Asian Liberal Arts Universities in 2017, with Yale-NUS prominently featured at its opening conference, seemed to confirm that liberal education was on the rise in Asia.<sup>5</sup>

**Y**et the project was not without controversy in Singapore or New Haven. Stateside, while initial faculty planning committees at Yale embraced the vision with enthusiasm, some Yale faculty looked upon Singapore with skepticism. The city-state had the institutions of a parliamentary democracy, but only the People's Action Party had held power since independence, sometimes using heavy-handed tactics toward opposition leaders to maintain it. Advocates for press freedom have criticized the government's censorship power and tight hold on traditional news media. And although news coverage critiquing the government has become more widespread in the internet era, the prosecution of the Online Citizen, a blogging platform known for its political commentary and activism, shows that independent media still plays a precarious role in Singapore. Anti-sodomy laws have also been a flashpoint. For decades, LGBTQ+ activists opposed Section 377a of the penal code, which criminalized sex between men, before it was repealed in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after the agreement to establish Yale-NUS was finalized in 2012, noted Yale political scientist Seyla Benhabib criticized the "naïve missionary sentiment" behind the Yale administration's proposal to spread liberal education abroad.<sup>7</sup> Faculty at Yale endorsed a resolution that read, "We urge Yale-NUS to respect, protect and further principles of nondiscrimination for all, including sexual minorities and migrant workers; and to uphold civil liberty and political freedom on campus and in the broader society."<sup>8</sup> Eventually, Human Rights Watch and the American Association of University Professors criticized the venture.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, these circumstances led to the College being judged as a political project, by critics in Singapore and abroad, when our main goals were educational. The fate of academic institutions is often determined by external political conditions, regardless of institutional attempts to remain distant from partisan politics.

In my experience, Yale-NUS upheld principles of nondiscrimination and academic freedom, as well as on-campus liberties. More complicated is the question

of political freedom in the broader society. On the one hand, I did not consider the role of a university administrator visiting from another country to include direct involvement in political matters. On the other hand, vigorous debate on campus gave young people an opportunity to envision social change. The first class of students matriculated in 2013 and quickly established the first LGBTQ+ student organization in Singapore. There were also more diverse affiliations among students than one typically finds on an American campus: some were government scholars, others formed a Christian fellowship, and many went on to work in the private sector. Nonetheless, the students and alumni of Yale-NUS College have often received attention for their politically progressive views. For example, left-leaning activists in Singapore had a mixed view of Yale-NUS, sometimes praising the wide-ranging debates held on its campus, other times viewing the College as too close to the government, its main funder.

This kind of international attention to government policies – notably concerning press freedom, freedom of assembly, academic freedom, and the regulation of sexual behavior – was veritably uncomfortable for Singaporean university administrators, civil servants, and government leaders. To the Singaporean government’s credit, during my five years at the helm of Yale-NUS, and in the seven years since, the government upheld its promises to honor academic freedom and strong nondiscrimination policies on campus. As a result, students and faculty were permitted to work closely with organizations supporting migrant workers; the College’s decision to offer gender-neutral housing for students received widespread media coverage; opposition politicians and cabinet members were frequent guest speakers on campus; and students on campus had access to books and films that were restricted elsewhere in Singapore, prior to the government clarifying its policies so that these books and films became available (in principle) at all Singaporean institutions of higher learning. Although there was frequent debate over whether the College was living up to its promises, consensus on campus and in the broader community was that academic and other types of freedom thrived at Yale-NUS, which was sometimes described as a bubble within Singaporean society. In 2019, when the College’s administration, with faculty support, canceled a proposed Week Seven program on public protest, the incident brought attention to the extent that Yale-NUS felt compelled to observe the “out-of-bounds markers” of acceptable political behavior in the city-state.<sup>10</sup>

The “liberal” in “liberal education” is not identical with liberal politics. Despite this distinction, both meanings of the word relate to freedom, and one goal of a liberal education is to educate people for a life of freedom. Other goals may be captured under different names like “holistic,” “whole-person,” or “collegiate” education; “interdisciplinarity”; or simply “delayed specialization.” Likewise, the “liberal arts” traditionally encompass both the arts and sciences, but only relative insiders are aware of this historical grouping. For most potential applicants



and their parents, “liberal arts” seems to imply the humanities or the fine arts. In translating the complex formation called a “liberal arts education” to a Singaporean context, I sought – with the support of a very engaged governing board, colleagues in administration, faculty, and students – to identify the key features of such an education for this century. Some have asked whether this effort was doomed to fail within a political system very different from that of the United States. Even so, liberal education predates modern democracy, and during the past decade, we have seen many limitations of the American brand of representative government. I believe that a liberal education can thrive in various political contexts if key features are preserved. With respect to politics, the preconditions for a liberal education are the freedom to debate matters openly on campus, the freedom of faculty to conduct research without outside interference, and the freedom of students to associate in groups of mutual interest. I endorsed a resolution of the newly recruited Yale-NUS faculty in late 2012 that stated, “We are firmly committed to the free expression of ideas in all forms – a central tenet of liberal arts education. There are no questions that cannot be asked, no answers that cannot be discussed and debated. This principle is a cornerstone of our institution.”<sup>11</sup> In my view, Yale-NUS College has remained committed to this principle throughout its existence.

**I**n the summer of 2021, the National University of Singapore informed Yale of its intention to end the partnership and merge Yale-NUS College with its University Scholars Program. This decision came as a surprise and disappointment to Yale leadership, since the goals of the partnership were being met. It came in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, during a period when travel between New Haven and Singapore was necessarily restricted, although it is likely that the decision was made before COVID-19 hit. Following the announcement, former provost and current president Peter Salovey expressed disappointment on behalf of the leadership at Yale University. While the initial agreement signed in 2012 outlined a funding model for the first twenty years of the College’s operation, Yale and NUS had the option of dissolving the partnership at various points, one of which was 2025. To NUS’s credit, it informed Yale of the decision four years before the deadline, allowing for an orderly closure of Yale-NUS College. Nevertheless, Yale was eager to continue the partnership, and Yale leaders spent the summer of 2021 seeking a way to maintain the affiliation. In press coverage of the August 2021 merger announcement, including commentary in the higher-education press, three broad explanations were put forward for Singapore’s overdetermined decision to end the Yale-NUS partnership: financial, geopolitical, and academic (or academic-political). All three considerations led to the forthcoming merger.

The financial elements of the decision, though prominent at the time, seem the least relevant to me in hindsight. It is true that Yale-NUS had not yet achieved its

ambitious fundraising targets nine years after its founding, but its financial situation was relatively strong. In particular, the fundraising challenges raised broader questions about the partnership, seeing as both Singaporean and Yale donors may have been hesitant to invest in a college they feared lacked stability. By contrast, fundraising for a new unit in New Haven (the Yale Jackson School of Global Affairs) was completed ahead of schedule in under five years, due substantially to the generous support of lead donors John and Susan Jackson. Simply put, it was harder to raise money for Yale-NUS. However, the endowment at the time of the announcement was adequate to provide at least 20 percent of operating costs.

More broadly, Yale-NUS spending was within budget every year. Yet after President Tan Chorh Chuan stepped down in 2017, new leadership at the National University of Singapore undoubtedly viewed Yale-NUS as needlessly expensive. International programs like Week Seven, though operated on a shoestring budget, drew negative attention from some commentators who viewed them as luxuries. The intensive liberal arts model with a student-to-faculty ratio of about eight to one was more costly to operate than that of other units at NUS, even though it was a bargain compared to leading liberal arts colleges in the United States. The per capita cost of educating a student at Yale-NUS was approximately US\$80,000, with over half of this cost covered by Singapore's Ministry of Education.<sup>12</sup> The merger with the University Scholars Program will offer some economies of scale. Still, so long as student-to-faculty ratios remain low, the successor institution (NUS College) may not be much cheaper to operate. From a business perspective, NUS may feel that it has gained useful insights from its partnership with Yale, but breaking the partnership destroyed some brand equity that might have been preserved with a less abrupt transition. Nevertheless, NUS College will inherit as much as it wants of the curriculum, some of the faculty, and all the physical property of Yale-NUS.

From the initiation of the collegiate project in 2009 to the merger decision in 2021, the political situation in Singapore became less favorable to Yale-NUS College and to international collaboration in general. Although certain areas of personal freedom have expanded (notably with the repeal of Section 377a in 2023), Singapore has not been immune to the forces of populism and nationalism that have affected most parts of the world, including the United States. The governing People's Action Party must face the electorate at least every five years, and in the elections of 2011, 2015, and 2020, the party showed itself to be highly sensitive to complaints about benefits reaped by foreigners, and to concerns of middle-class Singaporeans about the accessibility of higher education. Singapore has traditionally had one of the most open economies in the world and has benefited from the presence of multinational corporations and global finance. Regardless, many Singaporeans resent the high salaries of expatriates and the related high price of living in the city-state. Over time, in keeping with broader efforts to limit the number of work permits issued to foreigners, the government has

also largely abandoned its rhetoric about becoming a “global education hub.”<sup>13</sup> While some international partnerships continue to thrive, such as the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, others have been quietly dissolved, including those with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, and Imperial College London.<sup>14</sup> The Yale-NUS case received more attention because it involved changing the name of an institution. The United States is currently experiencing its own populist revolt against many universities, which may come at a cost to the country in the long term.

In addition, a college that proudly announced its selectivity was always at risk of “tall poppy syndrome,” an occurrence that often leads to intense scrutiny of success. Singapore has an elevated level of participation in postsecondary education. Despite its tolerance for government authority and its relatively high levels of economic inequality, Singaporean society maintains a deeply egalitarian streak and a strong commitment to meritocracy. Although admission to Yale-NUS followed meritocratic principles, and the College has always offered generous financial aid, government officials understandably worry that the presence of a highly selective and educationally elite campus, with many international students, may trouble the median Singaporean voter whose child may not qualify for even state-supported universities. For instance, about 42 percent of college-age Singaporeans qualified for admission to the six state-supported universities in 2021, a cohort participation rate that the government has been working to increase. NUS College may cost as much to operate as Yale-NUS College, but its sticker price for tuition will be lower, it will admit more Singaporean students, and it will admit a lower proportion of international students than Yale-NUS did. These political factors surely swayed the decision-makers. As an outsider, I cannot say at which level the decision to end the partnership was taken, but in Singapore, it is clear that such decisions are not implemented without the approval of the prime minister’s cabinet.

Finally, it is said that “all politics is local,” and academic politics are known for both their parochialism and their ferocity.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning, Yale-NUS inspired a degree of hostility in other parts of the National University of Singapore that saw the investments in liberal arts education as coming at the expense of their own priorities. Ideally, a new academic unit will strengthen the entire university by attracting talent and encouraging innovation. Elements of the Yale-NUS approach were incorporated into the new College of Humanities and Sciences at NUS and the curriculum (on which I consulted) for the future NUS College. But unfortunately, the broad innovative curriculum is unlikely to survive in its current form. Perhaps future educators or historians of education will see our efforts to create a curriculum spanning the West and Asia as a valuable contribution to intercultural understanding.

The fundamental model, however, has shifted considerably. Whereas Yale-NUS billed itself as “the first liberal arts college in Singapore,” NUS College de-

scribes itself as “the honors college of the National University of Singapore.” Yale-NUS created a relatively self-contained educational experience, in which students pursued their majors within the College while having the opportunity to take some courses at NUS and Yale. The intensity of that style of experience contributed to the College’s success. Many of my colleagues on the Yale-NUS faculty viewed NUS with some doubt, but I always thought that the College could benefit from its involvement with “two great universities,” in the words of our vision statement. During my presidency, I tried to guide the College toward being something like what former Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky describes as a “university college,” one like Harvard or Yale College, in which students benefit from participating in the life of a great university while learning from professors who are leaders in their fields.<sup>16</sup> The current NUS leadership has another, perfectly reasonable ambition for NUS College: it seeks to take the top NUS students and give them an intensive residential experience, with some shared curriculum, before having them complete their majors in the schools of the university. In such an arrangement, eminent faculty teach advanced courses across the university but are less involved in NUS College’s introductory curriculum. This is indeed the model of an honors college at a major state university, akin to the LSA Honors Program in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Such an approach allows students access to a wide array of specializations, though it slightly dilutes a comprehensive collegiate experience.

**T**o what extent did Yale University and the National University of Singapore achieve their goals in this partnership? In any institution, multiple goals are pursued by multiple constituents. Yale achieved the goal of developing an innovative form of international liberal education, and educated many promising students and prospective university administrators in the process. The investment in Asia was greeted with enthusiasm across the continent and signaled Yale’s continuing global ambitions. The political situation, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, has somewhat dented the university’s international strategy, but the founding of the Yale Jackson School of Global Affairs signals Yale’s enduring commitment to a global future. Like MIT or Johns Hopkins, perhaps Yale could have pursued a partnership without putting its name on the College. On the one hand, that would have made less of a splash at the beginning and end of the partnership. On the other hand, the ongoing success of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School suggests that another outcome was possible in different circumstances, and it seems worthwhile for leading universities to continue taking calculated risks in pursuit of their missions. Otherwise, one risks falling victim to the complacency of the incumbent. In the meantime, the National University of Singapore has succeeded in introducing a form of delayed specialization and other benefits of a liberal education while deciding to cease an explicit commitment to liberal arts education.

No doubt some people will conclude that we were naive to undertake this venture or will find that it was essentially neocolonial. I feel otherwise. Yale-NUS was a true collaboration jointly led by deeply committed Singaporean, American, and other international educators. The College not only educated remarkable cohorts for over a decade, but it also demonstrated the potential of liberal education outside the United States, encouraged international understanding and cooperation, and showed the value of a thoughtful approach to educational innovation. From an institutional point of view, it was a risk worth taking. It is easy for leading universities to rest on their laurels, but better to try and make an impact. In the words of the College's mission statement, we sought to educate "citizens of the world" at a time when such cosmopolitan ideals were under attack. The legacy of Yale-NUS College remains inspiring. A true community of learning, it provided a new model of liberal education in Asia and for the world.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> To give one striking example: the University of California, Berkeley, one of the world's great public universities, has blue and gold as its colors. The gold represents California, and the blue represents Yale, since many of Berkeley's founders were Yale graduates.
- <sup>2</sup> The original prospectus was issued on my forty-second birthday. Remembering those founding days over a decade later, I cannot help but recall Wordsworth's lines about the early days of the French Revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!" William Wordsworth, "The Prelude: Book XI," in *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850). I admit that forty-two only counts as young in a relative sense. The excitement was captured by visiting journalist Karin Fischer in "Blurring Disciplines, Crossing Borders: Yale Helps Reimagine the Liberal Arts, with Asian Influences," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/blurring-disciplines-crossing-borders>.

- <sup>3</sup> Pericles Lewis, “Globalizing the Liberal Arts: Twenty-First-Century Education,” in *Higher Education in the Era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, ed. Nancy W. Gleason (London: Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2018), 15–38, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0194-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0194-0_2).
- <sup>4</sup> Bryan Garsten, Rajeev Patke, Charles Bailyn et al., *Yale-NUS College: A New Community of Learning: A Report Submitted by the Inaugural Curriculum Committee of Yale-NUS College* (New Haven, Conn. and Singapore: Yale-NUS College, 2013), <https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Yale-NUS-College-Curriculum-Report.pdf>; taking inspiration from Francis Christopher Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012); and some additional history and analysis of Yale-NUS College is available in Bryan Penprase and Noah Pickus, *The New Global Universities: Reinventing Education in the 21st Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2023), 53–75.
- <sup>5</sup> Haiyan Gao and Yijun Gu, “Establishing a Research-Focused Liberal Arts College in China: Duke Kunshan University,” *Daedalus* 153 (2) (Spring 2024): 68–82, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/establishing-research-focused-liberal-arts-college-china-duke-kunshan-university>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Penal Code 1871*, Section 377A [repealed by Act 39 of 2022 wef 03/01/2023].
- <sup>7</sup> Seyla Benhabib, “Benhabib: What’s at Stake at Yale-NUS,” *The Yale Daily News*, April 4, 2012, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2012/04/04/benhabib-whats-at-stake-at-yale-nus>.
- <sup>8</sup> Mitch Smith, “A Call to Respect Rights,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/04/06/yale-faculty-resolution-expresses-concern-about-singapore-campus>.
- <sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch Staff, “Singapore: Yale to Curtail Rights on New Campus,” Human Rights Watch, July 19, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/19/singapore-yale-curtail-rights-new-campus>; and Joan Bertin, Marjorie Heins, Cary Nelson, and Henry Reichman, “An Open Letter from the AAUP to the Yale Community,” American Association of University Professors (accessed May 6, 2024).
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Salovey, “Report Regarding the Cancellation of a Learning Module at Yale-NUS College,” *Yale News*, September 29, 2019, <https://news.yale.edu/2019/09/29/report-regarding-cancellation-learning-module-yale-nus-college>. The crisis described in this report erupted on my fifty-first birthday.
- <sup>11</sup> “Free Speech and Non-Discrimination,” Yale-NUS College, <https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/college-life/overview/community-policies-and-support/free-speech-and-non-discrimination> (accessed May 6, 2024).
- <sup>12</sup> These figures can be derived from publicly available information, including information provided to the Parliament of Singapore by the Minister of Education in his explanation of the closing. See Chan Chun Sing, “Yale-NUS College Did Not Reach Fundraising Target ‘Through No Fault of Its Own,’ Transition to New College Will Reduce Costs: Chan Chun Sing,” *CNA*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/yale-nus-fundraising-target-no-fault-new-college-reduce-costs-2173821>. The Minister indicated that cost savings were not “the main motivation for the change.”
- <sup>13</sup> Hannah Soong, “Singapore International Education Hub and Its Dilemmas: The Challenges and Makings for Cosmopolitan Learning,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 40 (1) (2020): 112–125.

- <sup>14</sup> MIT continues a research collaboration with Singapore but is no longer involved in the administration of the Singapore University of Technology and Design. In addition to its ongoing partnership with Wuhan University, Duke continues to govern Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School jointly with NUS. For more information on the continuing partnership between Duke University and Wuhan University, see Gao and Gu, “Establishing a Research-Focused Liberal Arts College in China: Duke Kunshan University.”
- <sup>15</sup> The phrase is often associated with Tip O’Neill, former speaker of the United States House of Representatives (1977–1987), but is recorded as early as 1932. See Fred R. Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 566.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry Rosovsky, *The University: An Owner’s Manual* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).