

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 since its establishment.

From its humble beginnings in 2001 as a small, experimental programme within China's leading institution, Yuanpei College today is, by many measures, a resounding success. It has grown into a

fully-fledged liberal arts school with more than 11,200 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 receive the best of the best," said Feiyu Sun, its associate dean.

But as the university enters a new era of splendour under Qingqi Qibang, Yuanpei will be expected to flourish while still with competition among Chinese graduates higher than ever before, as many people, even academics, see the liberal arts liberal arts model of teaching continues to be an uphill battle.

In the past 20 years, most of the presidents of PKU were from the hard sciences and technology, so we needed to turn out some of the liberal arts academics. Professors do not mind and that's a great sign. But many are not ready to move away from their 20-year-old habit of teaching.

And many have a popular notion of a year's rigorous exam preparation intended to place them into the next tier of schools or to work for a newly formed private sector. Many support a liberal arts approach but still want a grade.



Students who are given the freedom to choose their classes and their own skills requirements will also grow up to be more than just a year's preparation. They don't even need to be the smartest by their own yardstick.

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 within 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 without any extra effort could perform very well. And they were students who study professional knowledge from the beginning and professional skills."

It is this drive and 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 point, however, is always a struggle. On most university students, who pick a department and simply follow the path.

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