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Innovation in Liberal Education

Liberal education is at once one of the most honored and contested creations of the American university system, a mode of learning broadly and deeply which has inspired new programs and schools throughout Asia and beyond, even as it has become a site of debate at home. This presentation focuses upon Yale-NUS College in Singapore, through whose founding I explore the ways in which both new and old institutions might plumb the past successes and challenges of liberal education systems in order to create a form of education that emblemizes, promotes, and sustains innovation. While liberal education has long provided a breeding-ground for innovation through conversations across time and space, problem-solving, and leadership, it has also been criticized for allowing dilletantism, an isolated focus on the West or on the humanities, and an artificial division between student life, learning, and faculty research.

Through innovations in a common curriculum that encompasses both Asian and Western influences in humanistic, social, and scientific studies, Yale-NUS makes use of the enduring successes of liberal education to furnish a context for broad yet in-depth inquiry and a concerted fusion of life and research. Under the aegis of the school motto – “in Asia, for the world” – students participate in on-campus communities of learning while expanding the scope of their inquiry outward through research trips and internships. In drawing together a highly international group of students and challenging them to create connections across borders and cultures, this form of liberal education teaches students to take risks and experiment, to stretch beyond their comfort areas in a non-native, cross-cultural context. In doing so, it invests students with an innovative education so that they, in turn, might become innovators in the university and the world.