

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

July 21, 2022

Pola Lem

Twitter: @PolaLem

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



FEATURED JOBS

Lecturer BA (Hons) Illustration
ARTS UNIVERSITY BOURNEMOUTH



Research Fellow / Engineer (Membrane / Wastewater)



SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (SIT)

Research Engineer / Fellow (Chilled Water Systems)



fully-fledged liberal arts school with more than 100

Sciences/Biological Sciences/Food Tech

See all jobs

ever before

competition among Chinese graduates higher than

professors do understand that Yuanpei is important, but many departments do not

your former university's presentation

approach still seems radical.

ADVERTISEMENT



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 their 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 without any restriction could perform even better than those students who study professional knowledge from the beginning", said Professor Sun.

He credited 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 some Chinese 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 pursue in university," Professor Sun said.

ADVERTISEMENT

We're recruiting in airports

With unique benefits such as travel discounts, free parking and enhanced pay...

Apply now

PKU's recently built residential college seeks to address.

"We wanted to put students together to give them a public space so they could hang out, talk to each other, develop their many hobbies. We want to explore a style of university

life in China. Having a space for Chinese students to explore their own culture is