

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 fire as it festering since its establishment.

From its humble beginnings in 2001 as a small, experimental programme within



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competition among Chinese graduates higher than

professors do understand that Yuanpei is important, but many do not even today even

from year 1 and prepares them for graduation



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 in 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 love it," he said. "Yuanpei students choose a major, they choose it by their own will. In Yuanpei you truly love that major."

Like 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 pursue in university," Professor Sun said.

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liberal arts model

stage 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

China's liberal arts college

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