

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



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...200 students, allowing the success of the college to become its own institution. "Yuanpei has become the most popular college in PKU. Every year we have the most students from the college," says Professor Sun. "The college has a reputation for its high-quality education, and its graduates find jobs more easily than ever before."



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 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. They have students who study professional knowledge from the beginning and then go on to do research. It's led 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' desire. 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 a high quality education is not always easy. Unlike most university students who follow a department and family path, 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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Like its students, the college itself is still finding its way. "We 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 that is more friendly, versatile." Professors in China often consider this question, says Professor Sun.

