

World insight: a challenging time for cosmopolitan education

Pericles Lewis, founding president of Yale-NUS college, on a turbulent time for the liberal arts

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By Pericles Lewis



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After the remarkable recent political experiences, it is impossible for the president of a global liberal arts college to ignore that globalisation and the liberal order, if not in crisis, are facing powerful opposition. The opposition results in part from a decade of unequal growth across different economies and the sense that recent gains have gone primarily to international elites.

The economic stagnation faced by many has also become entwined with nationalistic attitudes and resentment of perceived outsiders; people with legitimate economic and social concerns have become prey to demagogues who promise easy solutions based on an imagined simpler past.

How can we in the academic community, and those involved in undergraduate liberal education in particular, respond to these troubling political developments? From the beginning, we at Yale-NUS College, a liberal arts college founded by [Yale University](#) and the [National University of Singapore](#), have sought to inculcate an “ethic of service” in our students. Much has been given to our students; we expect much from them in return.

Our students come from a wide range of backgrounds, and we have provided them with distinctive educational opportunities (including, in many cases, financial aid). As aspiring leaders in various walks of society, they may have to endure the prevalent hostility faced by those who are seen as part of a “global elite”.

As proud as I am of our students’ academic accomplishments and success in the job market, I am proudest of the work they have done with the broader community in Singapore and the region beyond. In a culture where primary school students spend a lot of time preparing for exams, our student group - known as KidsAccomplish Education - is helping young children achieve a broader understanding of education by giving them early exposure to the liberal arts and sciences. Another student group has reached out to children with autism, helping them improve their written expression.

A number of our students also held celebratory events and English lessons for migrant workers, some of whom built our new campus. Along with students from the NUS Faculty of Law they hosted a Migrant Workers Awareness Week to draw attention to the plight of the least powerful among us.

Another student group, the G Spot, pioneers in Singapore for raising awareness on issues of gender, sexuality and feminism, received the student initiative award from AWARE Singapore, a prominent gender equity advocacy group. Through our NGO bootcamp and internships around the region, our students have come to understand the diverse challenges facing Southeast Asia.

Students come to colleges and universities for a variety of reasons—as a space to grow and understand themselves, as a way-station between childhood and adulthood, and of course as a place to learn skills that will be valuable in the marketplace. But one of the enduring purposes of undergraduate education is to shape citizens who can capably address public issues and contribute to public debate.

Despite the challenges faced by cosmopolitanism today, our goal remains: to educate citizens of the world. The measure of our success will be the contribution our graduates make to human flourishing.

Pericles Lewis is professor of humanities and founding president of Yale-NUS College, Singapore.