

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



“I’ve always been a fan of liberal arts education, and I think it’s important for China to have a strong liberal arts tradition. I think it’s important for China to have a strong liberal arts tradition.”

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and can graduate in between three and six years instead of the standard four. They don’t even need to declare a major by their second year.

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, but they don’t

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