Yale-NUS College gets faculty, alumni backing

Dean of faculty believes college will be able to hire the best professors

BY AMELIA TAN

The man tasked with recruiting professors for the new Yale-National University of Singapore (NUS) College is convinced that it will have enough academic freedom and a conducive teaching and learning environment to hire the best and the brightest.

Professor Charles Bailyn, who teaches astronomy and physics at Yale University, said in a phone interview from the United States that he is convinced the college will be successful.

That is why, he added, he has agreed to serve a three-year term as dean of faculty, and spend the whole of 2013 in Singapore when the college opens.

"Yale hopes to re-imagine a liberal arts education in an Asian context, and I think by starting without constraints of history and traditions, we will be able to create the best liberal arts education," said Prof Bailyn who has been teaching at Yale for 20 years.

In recent months, some Yale professors have expressed scepticism that such an education, which hinges on free speech and expression, can flourish in the context of Singapore's laws.

Prof Bailyn said he understands their concerns. But he added that after having in-depth discussions with NUS and American schools with tie-ups in Singapore, Yale is convinced that the college will provide a conducive environment for liberal arts education.

Yale president Richard Levin said in a separate interview that a clause has been included in the final agreement assuring academic freedom on campus.

Several other professors from both Yale and NUS interviewed expressed support for the new school, adding that they would be keen to teach and do research there.

NUS law faculty dean Tan Cheng Han hopes that his faculty can develop a joint double-degree programme with the college.

Others noted that landing the partnership with Yale is a coup for NUS and Singapore.

NUS science faculty associate professor Kang Hway Chuan, who studied at Yale, said a liberal arts education makes students "think clearly, be imaginative and human".

"And these qualities, more than being proficient in specific skills or professional techniques, are what shape effective people in any venture," he added.

Professor Haun Saussy, who teaches comparative literature at Yale, said he would like to teach at the new college.

He added: "Having spent much of my life thinking about Asian culture and how it circulates in the world, a new college that focuses on precisely this relation is like a dream come true for me."

But a few Yale faculty members, who had raised objections to the tie-up, continue to hold on to their views.

Dr Mark Oppenheimer, the coordinator of the Yale Journalism Initiative and a lecturer in political science, said: "It is a very bad idea. A big part of Yale's culture is academic and political freedom and we should not compromise on it.

"If Singapore wants to partner Yale, then Singapore should change its laws."

Prof Bailyn said one area which he foresaw could be "complicated" is the role of a public intellectual which Yale faculty are known to take on.

Yale professors express their views on issues in newspapers, blogs and other media, some of which may run contrary to those of the American government.

Prof Bailyn said a committee will be set up for members of the college to seek advice for issues which they encounter.

Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Kishore Mahbubani said: "Professors and students are free to discuss any issue in our classrooms. Indeed, there will be more, rather than less, critical discussions in the new liberal arts college. Singapore should welcome that."

Assistant professor of the NUS law faculty David Tan, who teaches freedom of speech, said: "There is ample breathing space for academic freedom in Singapore. One just has to appreciate that what qualifies as "free" in one country does not necessarily mean the same thing in another."

Yale alumni in Singapore welcomed the college.

Yale Club of Singapore president Devin Otto Kimble, 48, said some younger alumni members feel the college has the potential to dilute the value of their degree but he believes that "the worth of a Yale degree should be based on the intellectual strength of the education and not its rarity."

Ms Teh Su Ching, 25, who studied literature and theatre studies at Yale, said Singaporean students will benefit from a liberal arts education.

"At Yale, I was exposed to a good number of disciplines I had no knowledge of in junior college."

"I began to consider issues from multiple angles. Outside the classroom, getting to know students from different parts of the US, not to mention different countries, made me think about the world from diverse perspectives," added Ms Teh who is now studying dramatic writing at Tisch School of the Arts Asia in Singapore.

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