Building a community of learning at Yale-NUS

Residential college model fosters peer effect of mutual learning and growth

BY PERICLES LEWIS

ONE of the aspects of American higher education that attracts so many top foreign students is the residential college model, which goes back to the First American institutions of higher learning such as Harvard and Yale and before them to Oxford and Cambridge.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) has recently been embracing the residential college model at University Town, introducing a residential component to its University Scholars Program at Cinnamon College, and establishing Tembusu and Angsana colleges, and new Yale-NUS Colleges.

Ground was broken this week for the new residential colleges for Yale-NUS. This model gives Singapore the opportunity to further enhance its status as an educational hub by adding to the educational landscape a form of education that is currently rare in Asia. Such a model emphasizes how the residential liberal arts college can shape a “community of learning.”

The first residential colleges were constructed at Oxford in the 13th century for students at the university there. The father of English poetry, Geoffrey Chaucer, paints a famous picture of a student at Oxford around that time, who wears a tattered cloak, rides an unshod horse and is rather underfed himself. So dedicated is the student to philosophy that when he gets some money from his friends, he spends it not on fine clothes, or a new horse, or even food for himself, but on books about Aristotle. Chaucer concludes this memorable portrait of the Oxford student by saying “gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”

It is important for students to be reasonably well-dressed and well-fed, but the essential character of college life is not just the attention the college pays to the needs of the body but also the sense of a group of friends and colleagues who live, work and learn together.

Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, its 5,000 undergraduates belong to smaller communities within their own colleges. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

An artist’s impression of Yale-NUS College, the first liberal arts college in Singapore, which takes in its first batch of students next year. The design of the college seeks to find an architecture which balances Eastern and Western contexts and traditions. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

Photo: Christ Church College, Oxford, where the first residential colleges were constructed in the 13th century for university students. PHOTO: WEST BANBURY

Yale’s most memorable benefactor Edward Harkness, Yale, which had grown substantially, was able to construct the first group of beautiful residential colleges. The new college made possible the concept that we have come to call “nested communities.”

Within the larger group of over 5,000 Yale undergraduates, students today belong to a number of smaller communities, notably the group of 400 students in their own college, the smaller group of around 40 in their own neighbourhood within the college, and the even more intimate group of four to eight siblings. These nested communities give Yale students strong bonds to their peer groups.

Yale replicated the architecture of Oxford and Cambridge, but it also made two distinctive contributions to the idea of a residential college. The first was that Yale had been, since the 19th century, a leader in the United States in the development of extra-curricular activities, or what we today call the “co-curriculum,” namely the sports, clubs, societies, musical groups and student publications that create a busy civil society in parallel with the official curriculum taught by the professors.

Second, after some experiments, students were given the freedom to choose their own college, Yale recognized the value of making each residential college a microcosm of Yale College itself, containing a diversity of talents and backgrounds. Studies have found that having a roommate from a different background or a different country significantly improves the learning experience of a typical undergraduate.

Friendships formed with people unlike oneself blossom later in life into a broad-mindedness, a cosmopolitan outlook, that can be calculated more successfully through informal contacts than through formal lectures on tolerance. (In this context, lively debate is part of everyday life. This is just one of the ways that the Yale–NUS partnership can encourage openness and understanding.)

The design of Yale–NUS College seeks to find an architecture which balances Eastern and Western contexts and traditions, but it has, in truth, created something new, something greater than the sum of its parts. Courtyards punctuated by towers set in lush landscapes and a set of processionals encourage the openness, energy and optimism of the curriculum we are designing.

Much like its educational mission, the architecture of Yale–NUS, while lovingly aware of its antecedents, is strongly committed to the ideas and responsibilities of this century and, in this way, is also a vision for the future. A metaphor used by Mahatma Gandhi in response to the relevance of the study of English literature for Indians articulates well our goal of bringing East and West together in a powerful and profound dialogue at Yale–NUS College.

He wrote: “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed, I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown out of my feet by any.”

May the cultures of Asia, the West and the entire world flow freely through the buildings of Yale–NUS College and into the minds of every generation of students. And may we send those students into the world standing proudly on their own feet.

The writer is the president of Yale-NUS College. This article is based on the professor’s remarks yesterday at the groundbreaking for Yale-NUS College at the National University of Singapore.