

Can liberal arts thrive in China? One college suggests they can

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It's a small liberal arts college in a rural area of China, but it's making a name for itself

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Students there have the freedom to choose their classes – with no core requirements – 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 in 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 majors without any restriction could perform even better than those students who study professional knowledge from the beginning", said Professor Sun.

He credits the success of the college to the support of the administration and the willingness of the faculty to embrace a new model of education.

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