

The Closure of Yale-NUS College: Unclear Reasons, Clear Implications

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The National University of Singapore (NUS) announced in late August 2021 that Yale-NUS College would be merged with the NUS's University Scholars' Programme—an undergraduate academic program much like an honors college in the United States—to form a new college by 2025. Almost everyone has understood this to be a *de facto* closure of Singapore's first and only liberal arts college, not least with Yale University clearly withdrawing from the whole venture. The whole affair has left us with a lack of clarity and a sense of surprise.

Three Surprises from the Affair

The first is the shock at why such a successful institution will soon cease to exist. That success could be measured on any number of metrics, from graduate job placement to an endowment that would be the envy of liberal arts colleges in the United States that are hundreds of years older. This is a remarkable instance of “institutional self-immolation,” as one observer put it.

Abstract

Much has been made about academic freedom and financial sustainability as the reasons behind the closure of Yale-NUS College, Singapore's much lauded liberal arts college, but these reasons are not plausible. A similarly tumultuous university closure in Singapore in 1980 may provide some pointers, if only in terms of what to expect next.

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The other striking thing was how chaotically the closure was announced. The president of Yale-NUS College said that he was “gobsmacked and flabbergasted” when the decision to close his institution was presented to him as a *fait accompli*, at the eleventh hour. The backlash from the student body has been greater than what anyone had foreseen. They are aggrieved at the distinct lack of consultation, or even any forewarning at all, about the closure of their college. Many of them feel short-changed, as they had given up places in prestigious universities overseas in favor of Yale-NUS College. They will soon have to peddle a defunct college on their CVs entering the job market. All of this simply does not gel with perceptions of Singaporean-style control and orderliness, whatever one’s opinion of Singaporean politics.

Most strikingly perhaps, no convincing explanation for the closure has yet been offered publicly. For sure, concerns about the lack of academic freedom in Singapore have surfaced. The financial sustainability of an elite format of education, involving low student-to-teacher ratios, was also cited widely.

But these explanations beggar belief that the typically all-knowing Singaporean authorities had no clue what liberal arts education would entail, when they embarked on the partnership with Yale University. It is also difficult to believe that they would allow the project to unwind so spectacularly in the way that it has. This has led Scott Anthony of Nanyang Technological University, in his [article](#) for *Times Higher Education* on September 10, 2021, to suggest reasons of “administrative empire building” within the NUS apparatus as a more plausible explanation behind the controversy.

Academic Freedom, Student Activism?

In 2019, a course at the College given by a Singaporean playwright on dissent and free speech was cancelled, on the basis that it lacked “academic rigour” and posed “legal risks” to students. His course was deemed to encourage students to protest. Those who claim that academic freedom was the reason behind Yale-NUS College’s closure commonly cite this incident. Yet a Skype conversation with the Hong Kong prodemocracy activist Joshua Wong, as part of a student-organised event on the college in 2017, passed without incident—and was arguably far more controversial than any college course on dissent and free speech. A similar Skype conversation with Wong conducted by a Singaporean activist as part of a public conference (that is, outside of Yale-NUS College) landed the latter in court with charges of organizing a “public assembly” without a permit.

It is understandable how fears of a clampdown on academic freedom, and free speech more generally, have gained traction since. About a month after the closure of Yale-NUS College was announced, the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act—which prescribes heavy fines and jail terms for those found to “mislead Singaporeans on political issues”—was passed by the government’s supermajority in parliament. Parts of the academic community have raised concerns that the new law is so broadly worded as to potentially impinge on academic activities as innocuous as presenting research at overseas conferences.

Students at Yale-NUS College have been afforded much more latitude in political activism than their peers in NUS itself, as part of realizing the ideal of free enquiry intrinsic to a liberal arts education. But there has been a discernible tug-of-war among the powers that be, with regard to the kinds of freedoms and student activism that would be tolerated at Yale-NUS College.

Financial Sustainability?

The official explanation by the president of NUS and the minister for education is that financial sustainability, rather than a clampdown on academic freedom, was the reason behind the closure/merger of Yale-NUS College. NUS also proffered reasons of improving access to liberal arts education for more students and strengthening interdisciplinarity. These arguments have been debunked by students of the college. If these considerations were so important, the students say, then why has the NUS administration not made greater efforts to lay out clear financial arrangements or a radically different student admissions policy for the new college that would replace Yale-NUS?

All of this also jars with other developments in Singaporean higher education, such as the announcement, earlier this year, of the opening of a new arts university—a private

institution supported by the government and to be formed from two preexisting arts institutions—which is unlikely to be much more financially sustainable than a premier liberal arts college supported by two world-leading universities.

Memories of Nanyang University

The closure of Yale-NUS College has brought back memories of an uncannily similar event in the annals of Singaporean higher education, which might provide some pointers.

In 1980, Nanyang University was merged with the University of Singapore, in what Nanyang’s students and alumni regarded as a humiliating shutdown by the government. That sparked political backlash, because of the symbolism of Nanyang University for the Chinese-educated community in Singapore, historically a left-leaning lot, politically at odds with the government. That 1980 event was said to be a key motivation behind the entry into politics of the previous leader of the opposition in the Singapore parliament, who was among the last graduates of Nanyang University.

This historical comparison is perhaps overly romanticized. Nanyang University represented a whole community and political constituency in the country to be reckoned with, whereas the Yale-NUS College community is really quite small. But the point is that there is a precedent of sorts, and it is tempting to extrapolate what it may mean for Yale-NUS College.

Shortly after the shutdown of Nanyang University, a new, institutionally distinct entity was set up on the same campus grounds. No resources or efforts were spared to grow that new institution, in the first instance, as an engineering institute. It was essentially a political project from the government to justify shutting down Nanyang University, because they had stated that Nanyang’s Chinese-educated graduates were facing declining job prospects. That entity is now the Nanyang Technological University, celebrated the world over for leading in regional and global league tables, all achieved in less than four decades. Meanwhile, few outside of Singapore have heard about the “original” Nanyang University. Likewise, it is not inconceivable that Yale-NUS College will soon be forgotten, while its successor institution will be lauded for its newer achievements.

The biggest lesson here is not that such university closures are always going to be tumultuous. Rather, it is that the tumult will probably mean very little in the larger scheme of things—for the wider public, unfortunately, there are factors in higher education that weigh more than academic freedom or institutional identity. ▲

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