This chapter empirically illustrates how civic engagement education has been fostered and hindered in a less liberal context, with Yale-NUS College in Singapore as the case study. Our findings are informed by focus group interviews, document analysis, and personal observations. Building on the conceptual foundation in Chapter 4, we argue that the liberal arts and sciences common curriculum, active learning pedagogies, intimacy and multinationalism of the college community, support for student initiatives, and can-do culture of Yale-NUS have combined to nourish vibrant spaces for student civic engagement. However, there remain barriers to civic engagement. These include students’ workload and major selection, perceived liberal bias in the college, national political regulations, and the intimacy of the college community, which can be a double-edged sword. Additionally, international students have faced distinctive challenges such as Singapore’s legal and cultural constraints on political engagement, and the absence of a critical mass of co-nationals for collective action.

The goal of this chapter is to share insights on curricular, extra-curricular, and pedagogical techniques for fostering civic engagement in less liberal political contexts. Specifically, we reflect on experiences as faculty members and share research conducted on student experiences at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, identifying the structures that have encouraged or hindered civic engagement education. In this study, we are interested in understanding not just what students have done in terms of civic engagement, but whether and how that engagement stems from their educational experience at the College. In other words, we are not only interested in assessing whether there has been civic engagement at Yale-NUS (there clearly has), we are interested in identifying the ways that the campus climate, specifically its curriculum, residential and extra-curricular structures, and pedagogical approach has nourished or inhibited student civic engagement. This chapter is largely empirical, and both builds upon and informs the conceptual arguments presented in Chapter 4 of this volume.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, we briefly discuss the complexities of teaching civic education and engagement in less liberal contexts. We have provided a more detailed discussion of this, and the debate surrounding the creation of Yale-NUS College, in Chapter 4. Next, we present observations gleaned from focus groups, document analysis, and personal reflections to summa-
rize how students’ sense of civic engagement has changed over the course of their college experience. Our goal is to identify the specific courses, pedagogical techniques, extracurricular experiences, and institutional features that have had the greatest impact in empowering or obstructing students’ civic engagement. We hope that these findings will enable fellow instructors and higher education professionals to benefit from the lessons we have learned as they develop their own curricula, programs, and institutions.

**Setting Matters: Civic Education and Engagement in Less Liberal Contexts**

In less liberal societies there are different institutional and normative pathways to civic participation than in more liberal societies. While instructors need not actively discourage risky behavior, they must be aware of the political and cultural context in which they are operating and help students develop a different set of tactics and rhetoric that will not be dismissed as dangerous and even seditious.

As we describe in Chapter 4, in Singapore specifically there are significant regulations concerning public assembly and political speech. For example, during an election period “only candidates and their election agents” are allowed to put up election posters. A police permit is mandatory for “cause-related” assemblies that are held in public or hosted in private but open to the public. Local activists have in the past been penalized for organizing peaceful protests without proper permits. Government ministers have been known to file defamation suits against opposition politicians and political commentators for slander and libel. In addition to these legal constraints, there are social pressures which shape how students may respond to and undertake civic engagement. Not only are there concerns over legality and state surveillance, but also reputational costs for behavior which appears too “political” or radical. Students, parents, and teachers may worry about students’ employability, for example, if they participate in activities or publicly share views that are overly critical of the sociopolitical status quo.

In such a context, overtly political civic engagement education can appear and feel subversive. Higher education instructors may need to deliberately create an environment in which students feel safe and secure acquiring knowledge and admitting to an interest in politics and societal change. At the same time that it is important to be sensitive to local legal and cultural structures, we have found that students value having enclaves, micro-climates, or “free spaces” in which to ask challenging questions about social and political issues. Educational spaces create such enclaves. Forms of civic engagement that embrace imagination, empathy, community-building, and community-tending take on special importance in the Singaporean educational context. These skills, so critical in less liberal societies, are also important in “liberal” societies of the 21st century, societies marked by high levels of political polarization and decreasing levels of political deliberation.

Insofar as “civic engagement education” is about creating spaces where students can develop an interest in social and political issues, and engage in genuine conversation and disagreement, we propose a civic engagement pedagogy that is culturally relevant, one that is grounded in the students’ sociopolitical opportunities and draws on discourses from the students’ home environment. Instructors and students must work together to create spaces where free speech, experimentation, discussion of alternative ideas, and effective strategies for change may take place. In this chapter, we share the results of a preliminary investigation into one college’s experience in adapting to the institutional and cultural backdrop of a less liberal society, and explore practices designed to create spaces for civic learning.

**Civic Engagement at Yale-NUS College: Bastions and Barriers**

In December 2020 we conducted four focus groups with a diverse subset of Yale-NUS students. In addition to the information gleaned from these conversations, we draw upon the authors’ personal
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observations from working at Yale-NUS College since 2014 and 2018 respectively, reflections of
our student research assistants, conversations with Yale-NUS students and faculty, and content
analysis of student Facebook groups, the student newspaper, and local news outlets.

A total of 24 students took part in 90-minute long focus groups: 13 seniors, 3 juniors, 4 sopho-
omores, and 5 first-years. Focus group findings cannot claim to be representative of the student body
as a whole, but we collected valuable and salient information based on a diverse group of subjects;
students’ backgrounds varied significantly in terms of class year, nationality, major/ primary aca-
demic interests, and personal commitment to civic engagement. Thanks to the diverse interests
and backgrounds of our participants, several valuable themes emerged across the focus groups
which illuminate the ways Yale-NUS structures encourage and discourage civic engagement.

Civic Engagement Means Many Things
The first question we asked in each focus group was “What does ‘civic engagement’ mean to you?
What do you associate with that phrase/idea?” Unsurprisingly, responses reflect the variety of
definitions in popular and academic discourse, but also reflect different approaches our students
take to civic engagement in our institutional and national context. The definitions students offered
ranged along the following spectra:

Social v. Political: Pro-social community engagement ←→ Political engagement
with the state/law

Intake v. Output: Being interested, curious, and paying attention ←→ Taking
action/change-making

Intimate v. Public Space: Speaking about values/opinions only within social/
family circle ←→ Publicly taking a stance

Dialogue v. Action: Conversations about social/political issues ←→ Protest, con-
frontation, overt activism

Within this non-randomized group, only three students explicitly referenced protest to de-
scribe what civic engagement meant to them. Rather than associating the term with a set of observ-
able behaviors, students described the purpose underpinning civic engagement. They were roughly
evenly split on some issues. For example, six felt that being attentive and curious about political
and social issues—taking information in—was enough to “count” as civic engagement, whereas
10 said that interest without deliberate change-making was insufficient. Students had different
opinions about whether community service (e.g., tutoring under-resourced youth, volunteering at
elderly homes, beach clean-ups) or Facebook posts “counted” or not. They also had different views
on whether action directed at the College administration “counted” or whether civic engagement
had to be directed at formal state politics and legal frameworks.

In sum, participants had very different prior beliefs about what constitutes civic engagement.
However, as established in Chapter 4, rather than speaking to the need of imposing a uniform
ideal of student civic engagement, this speaks to the imperative of broadening the definition of
civic engagement such that it is inclusive and culturally resonant across a diverse student body.
What matters most is creating the spaces and offering the basic tools and skills for students to keep
thinking and rethinking about civic engagement.

Trajectories of Students’ Civic Engagement over Time
Prior to the focus groups, the authors identified three categories to describe Yale-NUS stu-
dents in terms of civic engagement:

Politically Engaged: Those already involved or working towards involvement
in politically-oriented activity, lobbying of political authorities; organizing clubs or events around political issues; citizen journalism/blogging; politically-oriented Instagram accounts; or volunteering for political-minded non-profit organizations.

**Socially Engaged:** Those who are involved or plan to be involved in charity work, service, or community-building of a less explicitly politically-oriented and more social or cultural nature, e.g., church-based service, reading to the elderly, volunteering at an animal shelter, beach clean-ups.

**Unengaged:** Those who do not spend time on social or political engagement. Students in this category may intentionally avoid civic engagement because they are skeptical or opposed to such activities or simply be uninterested.

During the focus group sessions, we presented these categories to students and asked them to share which, if any, best described them upon entering Yale-NUS. We then asked how their identification in terms of engagement has changed, or not, over time. A number of students rightly noted that to separate social from political issues reflects a false distinction, since social needs reflect political choices and vice versa. (This observation reflects their training in the social sciences and political philosophy components of our Common Curriculum, described below). Nevertheless, these categories proved useful in revealing the following themes regarding the trajectory of students’ engagement over their college career.

First, the focus groups—and our personal experience—suggests that students who identify as “unengaged” often become more engaged. They become, at a minimum, more interested and curious, such that they exhibit “intake” engagement if not “active” engagement. Several shared that, in their families and secondary schools, prior to college they had not been encouraged to engage with sociopolitical issues. Others reported being actively discouraged from engaging. Coming to Yale-NUS College (which students often refer to as “YNC”) created not only the opportunity but the expectation to engage with these issues because of the Common Curriculum content and overall sociopolitical appetite of the student body. As one student described, upon arriving to the College they were immediately “intimidated by all these people who were very aware and involved, [whose] main interest in YNC was to become more engaged, because [they] can have [their] voice heard.” Or, as another put it, on the first day on campus they concluded “This school is kind of intense—I don’t know how to deal with this political engagement. It felt like that was another type of people I didn’t know if I was going to become.”

Second, we observed that students who entered college “politically engaged” selected Yale-NUS as their college in part to deepen their political engagement within this institutional context. However, among more politically engaged students, the experience of locals and internationals sometimes diverges. While local students of more progressive leanings are more likely to find like-minded change-makers and thereby deepen their engagement at Yale-NUS, many international students reduced their political engagement and/or redirected their energy towards social rather than overtly political causes. This is because they are in a country that is not their own, where they have fewer rights to engage, and where they are less knowledgeable and therefore less confident acting on local issues. Therefore, many of the international students we spoke with have focused their change-making energies on the college itself. We will explore this further below.

In the following section, we develop these insights and highlight the primary institutional, curricular, and normative structures within Yale-NUS that contribute to these trajectories of civic engagement.

**Sources of Civic Engagement Education**

For students whose interest in social and political issues grew after joining Yale-NUS, four key
sources of change emerge from our research.

1. **The Common Curriculum**, which provides a shared language from which to collaborate with peers. We will discuss the curriculum in detail below.

2. **The intimacy of the Yale-NUS community.** The small size and fully residential structure make it easy to find peers who share interests and to organize into student groups and associations.

3. **The multinationalism of the student body** came up repeatedly as a spark for greater interest in civic engagement. Students reported that meeting peers from other cultural, social, and political contexts made them realize their own views were highly socialized and, therefore, could be open to debate and scrutiny. This generates curiosity and critical reflection of their own upbringing, which encourages greater interest in social and political dynamics in other contexts. Such statements suggest that the multinationalism of the student body is a key instigator of civic engagement.

4. **The creative, can-do culture of Yale-NUS and administrative support that makes it easy to create new organizations, events, and journals based around shared interests.**

Below, following Thomas and Brower, we discuss how these factors have combined to generate social spaces for effective civic engagement education. Specifically, our research surfaced the importance of course design, instructional strategies, campus culture, residential life, and the integration of curricular and extra-curricular activities.

**The Common Curriculum: An Immersive Liberal Arts and Sciences Experience**

Focus groups suggest that the shared experience and the illuminating content of the Common Curriculum fosters civic engagement—as it was designed to do. All students take the same courses in the same sequence, most of which fall in the first three semesters of their college experience. Each course is team taught, with students assigned to a small seminar for each course. Most seminars—which students typically refer to as “discussion sections”—are capped at 18 students, emphasizing active, team-based, and/or highly dialogic learning.

Features of the Common Curriculum that seem most important for inculcating civic engagement are:

1. Its content, specifically open discussion of cultural differences, sociopolitical systems, and controversial topics. It stokes curiosity, allows students to imagine that change might be possible and desirable, and provides the entire student body with a shared vocabulary and conceptual reference points.

2. The seminar-based, highly interactive mode of instruction, which enlarges students’ capacity for active listening, verbal communication, and teamwork.

3. The skill of close-reading and analysis that is developed across several Common Curriculum courses.

Together, the Common Curriculum’s content and active learning environment inculcates traits that are building blocks for civic engagement and collective action: openness to new ideas, imagination that things can change, communication, tolerance for disagreement, close reading and analysis, and teamwork. Much of the literature on civic engagement emphasizes teaching
students to engage in controversial issues, develop cognitive skills to analyze and understand different perspectives, and locate sources of disagreement and consensus. Learning about and being nudged to take a stand on controversial issues helps prepare students to analyze and find their own mind on many issues they will confront as citizens.\(^9\)

Yale-NUS offers a model of what a classroom should be—interactive, even contentious—that is different from what many students are accustomed to. Dialogue and disagreement over controversial issues is not commonplace in secondary schools around the world. Fostering voice and comfort with constructive disagreement in a conflict-avoidant, more hierarchical educational culture is not easy. Moreover, in contexts where a secondary teacher’s primary function is to teach students to achieve high scores in standardized national exams, there is little time or incentive to teach dialogue or disagreement.\(^{10}\)

For students socialized to absorb and to conform in the classroom, the Common Curriculum marks a departure by asking students to question, probe, and disagree. That the curriculum has this impact is by design. As the first faculty handbook stated, “The freedom of faculty members to explore controversial topics in their teaching and scholarship is critical to the College’s educational mission.”\(^{11}\) This chapter now offers some detail into the content and pedagogical techniques that make the Common Curriculum a transformative experience in terms of civic engagement among students.

Common Curriculum Content

During our focus group sessions, when asked whether their academic experience influenced their civic engagement, students most often referenced the Common Curriculum and three courses in particular: Comparative Social Inquiry (CSI), Philosophy and Political Thought (PPT), and Modern Social Thought (MST).

Comparative Social Inquiry, which students take in the first semester of their first year, introduces social institutions, social norms and control, and the socially constructed nature of things. Key topics include intersectionality, power and legitimacy, the psychology of conformity, the nation and state, markets and inequality, gender, race, family structure, social movements and change. Mid-way through the semester students engage in a “Break a Norm” activity where they leave campus and defy a social norm of some kind (without putting themselves in danger or breaking the law). Students conduct these experiments in any variety of ways. For example, some students dress in ways that buck convention, others engage in pro-social behavior like carrying groceries to peoples’ cars. In the final assignment students pick a social institution or idea and analyze how it has changed or might change in the future. These are powerful ideas and experiences for first year students, from around the world, to process together.

Students also take a two-semester course on Philosophy and Political Thought, which encourages them to consider the ethics, logic, and consequences of different worldviews and political philosophies. The first semester is designed around several questions, but, perhaps most important, is “How should we live, individually and together?”\(^{12}\) The second semester again focuses on a set of questions, two of which are: “What is a state and what is its proper purpose? What is the relation between governing and the interests or rights of the governed?”\(^{13}\) Taken together, the course prompts students to consider how they have lived, and imagine other social systems, encouraging them to see their own state and political context in a comparative light, and to imagine the potential for different political possibilities.

Modern Social Thought, which students take in the first semester of sophomore year, introduces and critiques texts by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault as well as feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial writings of Saba Mahmood, Frederick Douglass, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Fei Xiaotong, and others. The course is organized around discussing specific thinkers and themes like gender, race, capitalism and communism, feminism, colonialism and orientalism, repression, bureaucracy, authority, and social solidarity.

These are Common Curriculum courses that students referenced most frequently as sites for controversial and politically salient discussions. Students commented that this Common Curricu-
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The curriculum provides “the vocabulary to speak about things” happening in the world and in Singapore, essentially a “shared vocabulary” to explore and discuss social and political issues. CSI and MST were repeatedly credited with, as one student described, “helping make better sense of social realities and drawing attention to the fact that civic engagement is needed” by giving students “the conceptual tools to understand better” and “question various conventions.” And, another student explained, by informing a “moral framework and [shaping] the way you view the world,” students are able to understand social issues as “stemming from social structures or capitalism which then helped [students] think about how [students] would want to solve them or how [students] would even question them and share that with others.”

Perhaps most importantly, the Common Curriculum fosters engagement by acclimating students to openly discussing sensitive issues in diverse groups. Speaking specifically of the philosophy courses, a student noted that these create “safe spaces” for discussion of unconventional issues or ideas: “Philosophy courses can provide a safe space for dissenting opinions, because you get to structure your dissenting opinion around this [text] . . . and your discussion is much more theoretical and conceptual and grounded in some texts that it doesn’t become confrontational.”

Relatedly, one student noted that the academic environment plays a part in “normalizing” conversations in the “college social sphere.” The Common Curriculum offers “a good foundation of exploring” history and philosophy from diverse traditions, while bringing significant political and social “issues to people’s minds.” Whereas in other environments talking about politics might be seen as too provocative or radical, at Yale-NUS talking about politics and social institutions is required. Engaging with politically charged ideas is effectively homework, and therefore becomes normalized into the fabric of students’ intellectual lives. As a result, it becomes socially more safe to engage in politically-relevant discussion and inquiry outside the classroom as well. For students, being exposed to different political and value systems begs the question of, “Okay, what do I do with this information?” This is often the first major step towards greater civic engagement.

Seminar-Based, Active Learning Pedagogy

The curriculum achieves “productive engagement” in part by exposing students to a wide range of authors, worldviews, philosophies, and narrative traditions. But the Common Curriculum also fosters engagement by emphasizing “face-to-face encounters and on the practices of articulate communication” in seminar settings.

Focus group comments reflect the impact of seminar-based, active learning modalities on students’ capacity and interest in civic engagement. Not only does the seminar setting give students practice and confidence speaking their own mind, it also acclimates them to being disagreed with, which is helpful for those entering into wider social and political discourse. This finding is exemplified in the following comments:

My comfort level in talking about [controversial sociopolitical issues] has definitely increased over my college years...because I’ve also gained a vocabulary for voicing all these concerns... In the past with political issues, I would feel a certain way, but I wouldn’t be able to actually verbalize or articulate [my thoughts and feelings] to certain people... The [Yale-NUS] classroom setting... is a very good way to hone those kind of skills:... distilling your thoughts and then sharing it with a wider audience... Talking to my friends, my family about politics...that really alerted me to how much I’ve grown throughout my college years. And how I’m better able to share, [and] maybe even convince people now.

I’m better at calling people out... [But] it’s a bit of an uphill battle...because people who are not in YNC or have not received the same kind of education do not have the same vocabulary or the same background info as to why I’m saying the things that I’m saying or why I feel strongly about things...YNC has almost
imposed on me some kind of duty to speak up about these things, where I’ll feel bad if I don’t.

Seminar based [learning]...made it easier for me to...say my opinions, even if people disagree... One reason why I wouldn’t participate [prior to college was] because of fear that someone would disagree with what I’m saying, but exposure to seminar style learning has made [me] more comfortable being disagreed with and therefore speaking.

Not all students share this perspective of course. For example, one student stated the Common Curriculum taught them to “articulate my views” but not around politics and social change per se. Identifying as not very politically active, this student claimed, “I’m just someone who prefers to do things on a more individual, on a more small-scale level, which is why I’ve never identified with any large-scale organization or concerted civic engagement movements.” Evidently, this student’s enhanced comfort with sharing opinions inside the classroom has not translated to a greater eagerness to be heard outside the classroom or academic context. This sentiment was echoed by others, who suggested that their education had given them skills for civic engagement, namely articulate communication, but had not given them an appetite for using those skills in explicitly politicized engagement and public discourse.

Emphasis on Close Reading and Analysis

In addition to fostering inquisitiveness and practice in articulate communication, the Common Curriculum also inculcates close, critical reading skills. Although not as prominent or commonly raised, students pointed to this as another way the curriculum encouraged greater civic engagement. For example, with reference to Philosophy and Political Theory, one student described how close reading to “identify sources of disagreements” and “find common ground” among authors are useful skills when engaging in sociopolitical debates. Another student reflected how training in close reading made them a more critical reader, able to distinguish “smoking gun” from “unconfirmed sources.” The student noted that even Quantitative Reasoning, a Common Curriculum class that few students explicitly associated with civic engagement, incorporated data visualizations and prompted students to question whether those visualizations provide correct data. This kind of exercise helped develop “a more critical eye.”

In sum, the social sciences and explicitly politically charged courses in the Common Curriculum—Comparative Social Inquiry, Modern Social Thought, Philosophy and Political Theory—include content and develop analytical and conversational skills that contribute to engagement with sociopolitical issues. Yet we found that the Humanities and Sciences/Mathematic components of the Common Curriculum also contributed to civic engagement by developing students’ close reading skills and data analysis skills, respectively. In this sense, the full liberal arts and sciences nature of the Common Curriculum empowers students to engage more actively and more impactfully in civic affairs.

Complementing this broad curricular context is the residential and extra-curricular experience, to which we now turn.

Residential Life, Student Diversity, and Extra-Curricular Learning

In addition to enjoying small class sizes and active modes of learning, Yale-NUS students experience a fully residential college and, aside from study abroad and leaves of absence, students are expected to live on campus during every semester. This means that students from all over the world get acquainted outside the classroom and have opportunities for iterative discussion and collaboration. As a new college, residential life encourages students to build the college they want to attend, by serving in student government, creating student organizations, authoring student
codes and policies, and taking leadership roles in most facets of college life.

We have identified three major ways residential and extra-curricular life fosters civic engagement within the Yale-NUS context: (1) Creating encounters with difference that lead students to problematize their existing norms and worldviews; (2) Fostering intimacy and connection that helps students find like-minded peers; (3) Offering leadership opportunities that prompt students to transition from intake to output modes of civic engagement.

The “Normal” becomes Socially Constructed, The Obvious Becomes Curious

The Yale-NUS student body, in total roughly 1,000 undergraduates, is very diverse in terms of cultures and political systems represented. About 50% of Yale-NUS students are drawn from across Singapore, which is itself a phenomenally diverse country in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, and culture. The international student population represents 70+ different countries. This diversity, combined with the residential requirement and the Common Curriculum, ensures that first year students will have encounters revealing the boundaries and the socially-constructed nature of their belief systems. For Singaporean and international students alike, being on campus creates space to problematize and critically re-assess the values they have been steeped in before college. We heard repeatedly in focus groups that this confluence of factors—the Common Curriculum alongside residential living—makes students curious and able to critically evaluate what they once took for granted. For example, one student reflected that the “diverse backgrounds of my friends” bring out different perspectives so that “what I consider normal, or my political assumptions, are actually not so normal for others, which is very different from the . . . place I grew up. So I think this diverse community . . . provokes my interest in learning more.” Statements like this suggest that the residential setting presents opportunities for un-learning pre-existing conceptions to hopefully facilitate self-transformation.

Some international students deliberately chose Yale-NUS because they foresaw it would serve as an enclave for political awakening and experimentation. Others did not have an interest in politics during secondary school, and that had no impact on their decision to attend Yale-NUS. However, even for international students who entered the College fairly unengaged, the supply of opportunities for involvement in social and political change has enhanced their appetite for engagement. Another student observed that having “a safe space on campus far away from home also meant that I could reflect on political engagement [in my home country]... That distance helped me study those things and those causes and... then be more engaged when I [return home].” But the distance also reduces opportunities for action in home-country politics, leading the same student to conclude that for them time at Yale-NUS “led to more political and civic attentiveness, but not as much action.”
Intimacy Creates Community

In addition to generating encounters with difference, the residential setting also facilitates bridge-building, enables students to meet “like-minded people.” Several Singaporean participants shared that they chose Yale-NUS because they thought it would be a place they could connect with peers who “share similar interests,” and engage with them on issues that might not be as openly discussed elsewhere in Singapore (they provided examples such as reliance on fossil fuels, sexuality, anti-capitalism, and toxic masculinity).

Comparing Yale-NUS to another, larger Singaporean university, one student observed that “the main difference that encourages civic engagement in YNC is the kind of students...there’s a greater concentration of students in YNC who already start off caring more about politics or social issues.” Given such a critical mass, this student “struggle[d] to find any particular political or social issue that [one] cannot find a community of people to be engaged in together with.” This student also pointed to the “many amazing alumni who have done so many great things” to conclude that “it’s very easy to latch on and...ride the wave of [organizations and initiatives created by earlier batches of students]...[It is a] conducive environment to develop any kind of interests...” Another student also spoke about how the residential community not only helps you find those with shared interests, it makes students feel safer sharing their true interests because they can have these conversations gradually and in small, close knit spaces. (However, we will see below under “Barriers to Engagement” how the intimacy of the College environment can also stifle civic engagement).

Even students who identified as more socially but less politically engaged shared this observation. One student, for example, said that they have become more interested in mental health issues, and attributes this interest to the interaction of simultaneously taking psychology courses while also living in residence with their peers. For this student, the college environment “opens up a lot more conversations about mental health in dealing with academic stress and the demands of college education, whereas before in [other educational or personal settings] people don’t really share these sort of struggles.” The student went on to say: “In a residential setting it becomes harder to hide [but] easier to share some of these challenges ... so both the [residential setting] and the curriculum definitely teach me about things that are present in society like these [mental health] issues.”

Lastly, a theme emerged regarding how the close-knit community helps students not only find like-minded people but also to share responsibility for change-making. One student described themselves as being interested in social change before college and noted that finding a community of people with “parallel journeys and interests” at college “really plays a big part in my continuous engagement” and also in “preventing me from burning out.” Students at Yale-NUS can share the strategies and burden of civic action. They also often hand leadership of their student organizations and initiatives over to new students, especially in their senior year when they tend to be busy with academics, job search, and graduate school applications. This tradition creates a sense of continuity and longer-term investment in the causes they care about most.

Many of the comments about campus culture we heard from students are echoed in the reflections of senior administrators. Yale-NUS President Tan Tai Yong worked at the National University of Singapore (NUS)—a very large, competitive university—for decades before joining Yale-NUS. When explaining how Yale-NUS differs from NUS, a much older institution, he points to the campus culture and size:

Our students are articulate, vocal, they speak up. You see them all the time, in the corridor. They approach you. They’re very active as well. So they organize a lot of things themselves, and they’re involved in so many things. So they feel that they are part of the community, whereas NUS has 25,000 undergraduates and 10,000 graduates, 35,000 students. Huge. And you had a kind of overlay of bureaucracy that has been in place for the longest time.17

According to Tan, unlike the more entrenched, hierarchical culture of NUS, the Yale-NUS
community is more inclusive and organic, thereby encouraging a culture of organizing and change-making among its students.\textsuperscript{18}

In fact, focus group participants report that the small size and comradery among students helps them strategize on ways to engage without taking undue risks. Since Yale-NUS is a very visible and scrutinized institution, local students feel they must walk a fine line. While many want to use their college years to encourage and mobilize societal change (e.g., advocating for climate policies and socio-economic justice, or the repeal of anti-gay legislation), they worry about job prospects, especially in civil service, if they get tagged as too “activist” or “subversive.” Several local students felt that by building a student community interested in politics and change, they can speak more openly with peers and with college staff about strategies for engaging in political activism without doomed career prospects or, worse, courting legal trouble. Some local students felt they would be less comfortable engaging in such open dialogue at other local universities because of their larger size, since it would be harder to find people they could trust.

In sum, the small size and residential nature of the College makes it easier for students to find like-minded peers, to build trust within the community, to organize, and to find emotional and pragmatic support for their civic engagement endeavors.

\textit{Leadership Opportunities and a Culture of Student-Led Organizing}

Yale-NUS has an extremely active extra-curricular culture, and myriad opportunities for student organizing and self-governance. In this sense, the College provides a physical and institutional site where students practice different forms and repertoires of civic engagement. Three factors contribute to this vibrant extra-curricular culture.

First, when the College opened to students in 2013, it did not yet have extra-curricular infrastructure like a student government, newspaper, debate team, recycling club, or acapella group. To establish this infrastructure quickly, the Dean of Students’ office gave students logistical and financial encouragement to build, build, build! This facilitative culture remains. Focus group participants shared that it is easy to get financial and logistical support from the College to organize beach clean-ups, perform concerts, etc. This creates ample opportunity to develop leadership and gain organizing experience, even if taking place outside an explicitly sociopolitical context. Second, Singapore secondary schools heavily promote Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs), and students get formal credit and recognition for participating in them. Many students at Yale-NUS are, therefore, already accustomed to extra-curricular organizing and creating “executive committees” for all manner of student clubs. Third, as a new college, Yale-NUS attracted students who were particularly interested in creating new programs and clubs. This opportunity to build new organizations and initiatives was what drew many of our pioneer batch to the College. This set a tone in our earliest days as an institution that students would be very active—arguably over-committed—when it comes to extra-curricular activities.

Together, these three factors have coalesced into an intense extra-curricular culture where many students are heavily involved in student organizations and various forms of self-governance. Students use the college newspaper, town halls, student government, clubs, policy initiatives, and posters in lifts to spread their ideas.\textsuperscript{19} Yale-NUS alumnus Tee Zhuo, now a journalist, stated that his involvement in helping create sexual misconduct policies for the college “shaped [his] ethical beliefs, taught [him] the importance of empathy, and also showed [him] the need for activism in seeking justice and holding people to account.”\textsuperscript{20} This aligns with the findings of Ho, Sim and Alviar-Martin, that treating students as “full citizens” on campus provides avenues to practice their civic agency.\textsuperscript{21}

One of the first student groups formed on campus was CAMPOS—the Committee for Appreciating and Meeting People On Site. CAMPOS created events to involve construction workers on the growing campus, such as community meals and games, as well as literacy workshops. More recently, students founded an Anti-Capitalist Identity Collective, offering a counterpoint to the popular Yale-NUS Consulting Group and the Yale-NUS Student Investment Group. The Debate Society and Model United Nations were also early and prominent groups. Students helped arrange
a dialogue session with Hong Kong youth activist Joshua Wong and helped to author a new sexual misconduct policy. When a Yale-NUS board member and Singapore Ambassador at large, Chan Heng Chee, publicly defended a law criminalizing homosexuality, students in the gender and sexuality alliance, G-Spot, demanded she resign and then hosted a dialogue session with her to explain their concerns and hear her perspective. CAPE (Community for Advocacy and Political Education) has become a particularly impactful student organization, dedicated to “raising civic consciousness and building capacity for political literacy in order to make civil participation more accessible.” It does so by hosting events and publishing political education resources such as its Advocacy Strategies webpage on how best to conduct advocacy in the Singaporean context.22

In the focus groups, students tended to emphasize these student-led initiatives as a foundation for civic engagement. However, the College has also supported formal civic engagement education through extra-curricular programs such as 1) Social Impact Bootcamp,23 2) Intergroup Dialogue,24 and 3) Visiting Speakers Series.25 These are formal, staff-supported programs to introduce contemporary issues and build student capacity to sustain diverse teams and work towards common purpose. When we asked participants why they did not mention these formal programs in their comments, they shared that while these programs are important for building capacity in civic engagement, they do not create interest in civic engagement. Students who participate in these events and programs are already quite socially and politically engaged, according to our focus group participants. As such, although they do not inculcate engagement where there previously was little, they likely help build capacity for engagement among those who are already invested.

Across issue areas, Yale-NUS students are encouraged to organize, educate each other, and dialogue. The way students spoke about membership in their clubs and organizations accords with findings on “identity collectives” on campus, as they likewise “provide essential spaces for minority groups to explore their own identities and to find fellowship in similarly-minded people, even if they are not part of the predominant culture or demographic.”26 This culture of student creation and leadership gives students opportunities to hone civic engagement skills such as communication, strategic planning, and teamwork. According to one focus group participant, as “a residential community there’s also a large number of avenues for actually actively building the community… I felt like I had a very strong role to play [helping develop orientation and serving as a residential advisor].” Another added, “in developing the kinds of relationships we have within our communities… you create a community that listens to each other and holds space for each other. So I think social engagement can take lots of forms, because we have that space to build the kind of community we want.”

Interaction of Curricular and Residential/Extra-Curricular Forces

Repeatedly we heard that the diversity of the student body, the content and format of the Common Curriculum, and the intimacy of residential life interacted to foster civic engagement. These forces do not only influence students, they have an immersive and interactive effect which contributes to students’ civic engagement education. For example, one student shared how their interest in becoming more proactive in environmental activism stemmed from the interactive effect of 1) extracurricular trips led by student organizations that showed the environmental impact of climate change on ecosystem health, combined with 2) the Common Curriculum module Scientific Inquiry’s emphasis on climate change, and 3) interactions in residences with classmates passionate about environmental causes. The abstract classroom learning was important, but the real-world exposure to coral bleaching amplified their commitment. Being in residence with passionate peers helped maintain the momentum and accountability to stay actively engaged.

Rather than being prompted explicitly to act by professors or by peers, students pointed to the immersive nature of the Yale-NUS learning environment and the “confluence of factors” on their interest and intensity of their commitments. “I find it quite difficult to identify a moment where I felt galvanized to act because of something that a professor said… because professors are not always very explicit about it.” A few students who had studied abroad in North America for their junior year noted the contrast between their abroad and Yale-NUS experience. In the Singa-
Civic Engagement and the Global Liberal Arts College

pore context, where protest without a state permit is illegal, professors would not say to students, “there’s a protest tomorrow, you can join.” Rather, students felt that civic engagement is more often implicit and embedded in classroom discussion so that “the motivation to act comes again from a confluence of factors... you hear certain things in the classroom, you see your friends doing certain things, you go online and you realize that you know people are doing things as well. Then it’s just that combination of things that gets you wanting to start.”

The interaction between a shared common curricular experience and shared living experience appears to be critical for fostering awareness and self-organization among students. According to one student, specifically referencing Comparative Social Inquiry (CSI), “the conversations I have outside of class with my classmates [about CSI] end up being really interesting... I feel like the courses don’t really do anything [to explicitly encourage civic engagement], but they do provide a launch pad to start thinking about it... Because my CSI [class] was right before lunch...we will go out to the dining hall [to have] extended conversations about our classes.”

In other words, students have reported something akin to a confluence of multiple free spaces for students to form mini-publics, forming and mobilizing consensus about a plethora of social topics, which in turn may prefigure civic agency.

One student captured what many of their peers had observed during the focus group:

I think just having both the academic and also social environment of being steeped in these issues makes a very big difference in having people think about them more consciously...[in the] social environment of Yale-NUS people do feel very subtle pressure to...have information and [understanding of local and international sociopolitical issues and] to have an opinion about things. And this is also very much trained by the academic environment that you’re in [whereby] you’re expected to speak up actively in class, you’re expected to have an opinion [about course material], but also to respond and critically build our opinion based on evidence or based on other students’ contributions...

The student felt that this expectation of engagement with issues is distinctive within Yale-NUS, and not typical of the Singaporean public. In other words, as the student put it, civic engagement is forged when the “academic and social feed into each other.” We have personally observed, and in the focus groups heard testimonials about, how students’ exposure to the combination of interdisciplinary curriculum, extra-curricular organizing, and the intimacy of residential life combined to make them more curious and more actively engaged in politics and consequential social issues. For example, one focus group participant shared their personal trajectory from intimidation to empowerment. In their first year, the student shared that “it felt like people who were politically engaged... were another type of people” that they couldn’t imagine becoming. Then after reading the popular book, *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*, which was frequently discussed among their peers, this student recognized this “was what it meant to be engaged. It was ‘political’ just to engage in issues and the things that affect society.”

The students in our focus groups described an educational culture that encourages—maybe demands—students to take action to build community and contribute. This culture is also articulated in a student opinion article:

Having had the good fortune to go through the Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS and thoroughly deconstruct and unlearn all the normative narratives designed to propagate class hierarchies and systemic injustices, [along with] enlightening experiences with inspiring people from diverse backgrounds, sometimes it is difficult to not loathe myself for not doing enough with the immense privilege that I have.

When comments like this surfaced during the focus groups, others would often nod, suggesting
this is a widespread view. In this sense, there is implicit peer pressure within the College to seek knowledge, to be opinionated, and to be active on the causes students care about. This might take the form of community service more than explicitly political engagement, but utilizes many of the tools that are also relevant for political engagement such as crafting appealing messaging, consensus-building, and community organizing.

To sum up, the Common Curriculum content, the active modes of pedagogy that are possible due to smaller class size, and students’ strong sense of community and self-governance—the curricular and extra-curricular—all come together to cultivate civic engagement among students at the College. However, as the next section shows, there are also palpable obstacles to the scope of such civic engagement.

Barriers to Civic Engagement

As we worked to uncover curricular, extra-curricular, and other structural drivers of civic engagement at Yale-NUS, we also sought to identify possible barriers. We generated several hypotheses through structured reflection prior to conducting the focus groups, identifying (1) workload and major selection, (2) perceived liberal bias in the College community, and (3) perceived conservatism in the local political context, as the most likely barriers to engagement. In the focus groups we did hear evidence that these were obstacles to greater civic engagement for many students. However, the focus groups surfaced additional barriers to engagement, namely (4) the intimacy of the College community inhibiting inquiry and honest debate, (5) internationals’ being legally prohibited and socially dissuaded from political engagement in Singapore, and (6) student diversity, specifically that international students may lack a critical mass of co-nationals interested in domestic politics of their home countries. In this section we describe these six barriers to civic engagement faced by students.

Workload and Major Selection

Among students who entered the College with relatively low levels of civic engagement, many shared the experience of becoming increasingly socially and politically engaged as they progressed through college. However, for students who entered the College already highly engaged, several reported their engagement actually diminished over their college experience, due primarily to academic workload.

Yale-NUS is an academically demanding environment, with a roughly 5% admit rate over the last several years, the College aims to be on par with Amherst, Williams, Swarthmore, Wellesley, and other highly competitive liberal arts colleges in terms of academic rigor. Students who value good grades and are highly motivated to excel in their courses may not have much time outside class for community engagement or political advocacy. Roughly 20% of students we spoke with named academic workload as a significant barrier to more sustained engagement. Workloads typically grow as students select majors, take more demanding courses, and work on a mandatory two-semester senior thesis (called the Capstone at Yale-NUS).

Workload seems to be a greater inhibitor to engagement for those majoring in fields not as explicitly tied to social and political issues. Students who major in the social sciences and humanities often find their coursework fuels engagement and vice versa. (We heard this specifically with reference to majors/minors in Law and Liberal Arts; Global Affairs; Politics, Philosophy, and Economics; Environmental Studies; Anthropology; and Philosophy). Several students majoring in sciences discussed how the engagement fostered in the Common Curriculum during their first two years dissipated as they transitioned to their major. As one student put it, the engagement “doesn’t sustain” and they can only continue it through extra-curricular organizations and volunteering, creating a time trade-off with school work. Some students reported that they desired coursework which integrates science and society, like bioethics and public health courses, so that they could continue to be engaged in social and political issues while also learning science.

Another theme that emerged in our discussion of major selection was the special position of
the Environmental Studies (ES) major. Some students majoring in ES and those who had taken courses on environmental politics noted that “the environment” feels “safer” to talk about than some “sensitive” issues in Singapore like criminalization of homosexuality, treatment of foreign workers, racism, and socio-economic inequality. Learning advocacy methods for environmental policy change thus felt less confrontational and divisive than learning advocacy skills in the context of social justice, identity, and class.

**Intimacy of Residential Life Cuts Both Ways, Especially Given Perceived Liberal Bias**

Although the College’s small size and tight-knit nature facilitates engagement by helping students find like-minded peers and learn from those with different views and backgrounds, it may also be a barrier to engagement. Students reported they often hold back from voicing opinions or questions on contentious issues for fear that it would upset people in the community, leading to alienation and social banishment.

The intimacy of the College may especially inhibit international students from more active forms of engagement on campus. For international students, the campus is their only home-base in Singapore, and so there is no way to “lie low” if they make an unintentionally offensive Facebook post or say something controversial in class. We heard several variants of this concern, which is exemplified in this international student’s comment:

My entire life is rooted in this very small campus [where] if you have an opinion about...a political or social issue, you should be ready to defend it...Especially if you have a non-liberal opinion..., you should have very good reasons [to defend that view]. I’m a third year student now, I [am] more selective about what I choose to have an opinion on... I still keep myself informed, but I can’t have an opinion about everything, because I’m not ready to defend all of those [views]. And since I live on campus, I don’t want to antagonize people and I can’t really escape to anywhere else. I can’t go back home [for the weekend like local students] or get away from campus to find another space...So I find myself being selectively engaged.

As in campuses worldwide, there is a perception, as illustrated above, among Yale-NUS students that conservative views and causes are more likely to be silenced or ridiculed than liberal ones. This may be more of an issue at Yale-NUS because the term “liberal arts college” is often interpreted in Singapore as referencing political liberalism. Since its founding, champions for more conservative views and those who take a more absolutist view of free speech, have lamented the “intolerance of intolerance” on campus. The authors have talked with students who felt they could not openly ask questions on sensitive topics like the morality of homosexuality, whether transgender identities are healthy, or why hard working “high achievers” should have to pay welfare for poor “low achievers.” These themes surfaced in focus groups as well. Some students suggested that while the small scale and free speech commitment of the College makes it easier for progressive students to find each other and organize than they might in other settings, it forces conservative voices underground, making it harder for students with conservative values to find each other. One example pertains to China’s crackdown on the Hong Kong protests last year. We heard from several students—in the focus groups and other conversations—who felt uncomfortable publicly defending China’s position vis-à-vis Hong Kong protesters.

This view was not unanimous, of course. Several focus group participants shared that, while students might conceal conservative leanings in residence life, different views did get raised in class because the seminars usually entail vibrant debates among different worldviews. However, some reported that both residential life and classroom culture were often a liberal echo chamber. In one student’s experience, too often students in seminars will express their more liberal or progressive views openly, while opposing views are not expressed. Therefore, the small seminar-style classrooms and diverse student body can allow students to learn about each other’s views and be forced
to hone their own arguments accordingly, but only when all students are empowered to share. This barrier to engagement—perceived liberal bias on campus—is notable for how much it echoes what we hear from the North American higher education context. Of all the barriers to engagement we uncovered, this is the least context-specific. Now we turn to barriers imposed by the Singaporean cultural and legal context, a very different set of forces.

Cultural and Legal Context

Political and legal structures do influence how students weigh the costs and benefits of civic engagement. Some of these cost-benefit calculations are obvious and clear-cut, for example students avoid spontaneously organized, unpermitted protests which are illegal in Singapore, because the consequences would be severe. One student who had studied abroad in North America reflected upon an experience where, immediately following a class on environmental policy, the professor invited students to join him in observing an environmental protest. This is possible because in that country, protests and public assemblies are open to all residents regardless of citizenship. This kind of experience is not likely to be replicated in Singapore where non-citizens are typically not able to attend cause-related public assemblies. In fact, international students are explicitly told not to get involved in formal electoral politics or participate in any speech that could be seen as inciting divisions among races or religions, which is illegal in Singapore.

Some calculations regarding acceptable political engagement activities are more subtle. Students intimated that the general conservativism and controlled political climate in Singapore influenced their choices in how to act on their political and social values. Some international students, for example, were cautioned by parents or friends not to get involved in Singapore politics even in more informal ways, because it could jeopardize their student visa. Local and international students described concerns that a reputation for being too radical or too activist could hurt job prospects upon graduation. Some students, for example, take pause before championing very liberal or activist positions on social media. This was an especially pressing concern for those looking to work for the public and business sectors.

Concerns about reputational damage surface not only in students’ reflections about their own actions, but also in how they react to their peers’ actions. One student recalled a situation where students organized a gathering in the college courtyard to demand the school administration adopt new sexual misconduct policies and event registration policies, among other issues. Such public gatherings regarding contentious issues are uncommon in Singapore, and in some cases may be considered illegal. Students who joined the gathering were aggrieved that more of their peers did not participate. However, some who did not join felt that the students staging it were putting the larger student body at risk. In addition to worries about legal trouble, they felt that if even a small number of students are too vocal and too activist, it will give the College a bad reputation in the local job market. Some local students that the authors spoke to at the time felt that international students who contributed to the gathering were insensitive to the risks for local students planning to anchor their career in Singapore. Specifically, they worried that government ministries and conservative firms may be hesitant to hire Yale-NUS graduates if they are seen as too antagonistic to local order. They did not want their Yale-NUS degree to connote rabble-rousing and liberal “external influence.” After this gathering, a heated debate ensued within the tight-knit student community. As one focus group participant put it, the situation “fractured a lot of relationships.”

Beyond concerns regarding legality and economic prospects, students also spoke of cultural and intellectual challenges to extending engagement beyond Yale-NUS. It was a common theme that attempts to bring such conversations beyond Yale-NUS are often stymied by a lack of shared vocabulary with those outside the College. Some students reported they worried that they came across as arrogant or obnoxious when discussing politics outside the College because they wanted to reference theoretical frameworks or authors who their non-Yale-NUS acquaintances did not know.

In this sense, the very exceptional nature of the Yale-NUS enclave has created limits on how far within-College engagement can travel beyond the campus. To be sure, residential, cultural, and
intellectual life within the College has formed a vibrant space that enables students to inquire, organize, and lobby for causes they are passionate about. But there remain barriers to bringing that vitality beyond the College gates.

Complexities for International Students

The focus groups revealed three interrelated barriers to civic engagement education for international students at Yale-NUS. These factors are likely to shape international students' experience in similar institutions located in politically constrained environments.

**Lack of Formal Rights**

International students face additional legal constraints, because as non-citizens, they are denied some opportunities to voice, organize, or access spaces for political assembly. The Parliamentary Elections and Presidential Elections Acts restrict foreigners from participating in "election activities." Non-citizens are also barred from attending or hosting gatherings at Hong Lim Park (Singapore's Speaker's Corner where pre-approved, government-sanctioned assemblies are permissible). In this sense, foreign students' ability to have anything like a “front row” seat to local politics is limited.

**Not Wanting to Undermine a Cause by Championing It**

International students we spoke to were pragmatic and understood they could endanger causes they cared about by being too visibly involved. A prevalent discourse in Singapore often blames “foreign influence” for more progressive, social justice-oriented activism. This assertion serves to dismiss certain perspectives and causes as not coming from Singaporean concerns or interests, and thus not warranting sympathetic attention.

Many international students felt it was important to take a “back seat” to their Singaporean peers for on-campus but especially off-campus organizing around sensitive issues. Some came to this view independently, others reported that they had been explicitly told by their Singaporean peers to keep a low profile in politically-oriented student groups, lest that group, or the causes it supports, be falsely portrayed as a trojan horse for foreign values. One student recalled being “firmly told” they could join a politically-oriented group, but was discouraged from taking any high profile leadership roles. Others intuited these limitations, as one politically engaged international student shared: “No one told me explicitly, neither my parents [nor peers], that I shouldn’t be engaged politically, but I refrain from doing so because of the impression...I get from media and news sources.”

In general, international students were sympathetic to the public relations imperative that social-political causes needed to be fronted by Singaporean student leaders, as exemplified in the following comments by two different focus group participants:

The primary stakeholders...are first and foremost Singapore citizens themselves... I’m still an international student who’s just here to study... I can stand in solidarity and agree or disagree with the policy and the opinions of my fellow students, but ultimately, they’re the ones... facing the brunt of decision-making by the government... Their voice should be the one that should be heard...

Being an international student in Singapore does feel like a constraining scenario...when it comes to political engagement ... You’re...feeling like this is not my place to be doing activism, and as much as I would like to extend solidarity with work that is already happening, I was never able to find a space in which I could directly engage, or... feel comfortable doing so.
With these constraints on involvement, international students we spoke to tend to funnel their energy in two ways: (1) to community/social services rather than policy change and (2) to change-making within the College itself. They may not be citizens of Singapore, but each one is 1/1000th of the Yale-NUS student body, and therefore more empowered to use their voice and organize for change vis-à-vis campus politics.

**Lack of Critical Mass for Home-Country Engagement**

Another way international students can maintain civic engagement during college in Singapore is to focus on dynamics in their home country. However, the diversity of the student body and faculty makes it challenging to find a sufficient number of co-nationals to collaborate with. There are 70+ nationalities represented among the roughly 450 strong international student population (just under half the student body). Students from some major feeder countries like China, India, and South Korea may have an easier time finding partners. But those from less represented countries and regions such as Eastern Europe, Africa, and South America described struggling to find peers or professors engaged with politics in their home countries. As one said, “some of the loudest voices are more interested in the American and to some extent European contexts.” Even students from countries neighboring Singapore have faced this dilemma.

We suspect that we would hear similar reports if we were to interview international students at small liberal arts colleges in North America. Overcoming barriers to engagement for international students, regardless political context, warrants further attention.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter, building on the conceptual groundwork laid in Chapter 4, reports on our research into sources and impediments to civic engagement within Yale-NUS College in Singapore. Our findings reflect focus groups, personal reflection, document analysis, and many conversations with students over many years working at the institution.

Our findings are not necessarily representative of the College as a whole and are inherently incomplete due to the modest size of our focus groups and the limits of our own experience. Nonetheless, we believe that this chapter presents important findings regarding the bastions and barriers to civic engagement in two more generalizable contexts.

1) **Highly multinational colleges and universities**: those with high percentages of international undergraduate students such as Yale-NUS. This category includes similarly transnational institutions or branch campuses that have emerged in recent years such as NYU-Abu Dhabi, NYU-Shanghai, Duke-Kunshan, and the Minerva Colleges. This category also includes older institutions with large international undergraduate populations such as Franklin University Switzerland, University of Hong Kong, ETH Zurich, Imperial College London, and several others. These institutions have opportunities to foster political curiosity, imagination, and ambition by bringing together students from such varied social-political contexts. These institutions also need to think through the barriers to engagement faced by international students that are discussed above. Some of those barriers may include legal rights to engage in local politics. Other barriers may be more subtle, such as lack of a critical mass of students from one’s home country with whom to organize. One strategy is to create opportunities for students to engage in change-making directed at the college itself.

2) **Colleges and universities in less liberal contexts**: this study has found that the less liberal sociopolitical context in Singapore does create both formal and informal barriers to civic engagement for students. However, this does not preclude civic engagement education. Specifically, we identify ways in which the broad-based curriculum, active learning pedagogies, residential requirement, small class size, and administrative support for student extra-curricular pursuits combine to equip students with interest in and skills for civic engagement. Regardless of context, students who wish to make a difference in their communities need to be thoughtful about the nature of those contexts. Learning tools for civic engagement within a less liberal context may even be a more
challenging endeavor, as students develop site-specific forms of change-making.

To situate civic education in diverse contexts, it is important to highlight that engagement is not limited to physical demonstrations or confrontational tactics. In less liberal settings, fear for reputation, future employment, and family legal security present real barriers to inculcating civic engagement. As such, methods for civic mobilization need to take these barriers into account. Learning about your students, their prior interests/activities, and perceived vulnerabilities is an important starting point for educators who want to foster civic engagement. In contexts with more constrained voice opportunities, it is helpful to expose students to multiple forms of engagement and various spaces for engagement (online activism, petitions, op-eds, art-ivism, activist documentaries, academic interrogation, service learning, dialogue, etc.). In fact, social media and the Internet have increasingly been used in less liberal contexts to champion and discuss various social causes. Yale-NUS students have likewise harnessed social media to promote key issues, such as sustainable living.

Effective teaching strategies may vary for different populations and locations. The means to empower groups to become more politically engaged will vary from liberal to illiberal contexts. Students have funnelled energies into educating peers and the public about politics, history, and sensitive sociopolitical issues. For example, the student-run Community for Advocacy and Political

Table 1: Summary of Findings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drivers of Civic Engagement</th>
<th>Barriers to Civic Engagement</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Liberal Arts and Sciences Common Curriculum</strong>: Learning about different social-political systems, recognizing socially constructed nature of own value systems and behaviors, close reading and analytical skills, normalizes discussion about political and social change.</td>
<td><strong>Academic Workload</strong>: Not enough time for civic engagement, especially for those in majors that are not directly related to societal and political issues.</td>
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<td><strong>Active Learning Pedagogies</strong>: Students find their voice, learn to develop own opinions rather than learning ‘right answers,’ communication skills, increases comfort with disagreement and genuine dialogue.</td>
<td><strong>Perceived Liberal Bias</strong>: Conservative students may not voice their views as freely, therefore not find like-minded students as easily with which to engage.</td>
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<td><strong>Size, Residential Requirement, and Intimacy of Student Body</strong>: Facilitates finding like-minded students, organizing, deepening knowledge and interest in social-political issues, feeling of safety to explore new ideas and identities being on campus and away from family/cultural origins.</td>
<td><strong>Size, Residential Requirement, and Intimacy of Student Body</strong>: Students do not want to be lambasted or ostracized for unpopular or ignorant comments. Will keep some questions or views to themselves because there is no anonymity within such an intimate campus community.</td>
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<td><strong>Multinationalism of College Community</strong>: Creates encounters with difference which spark imagination, interest in scrutinizing rather than accepting students' norms and practices of own cultural context/country of origin.</td>
<td><strong>Political Limitations and Perceptions of Conservative Local Culture</strong>: Local students do not want to risk legal trouble. International students do not want to risk deportation. Concerns that provocative action could be seen as too antagonistic for local culture and would jeopardize job prospects.</td>
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<td><strong>Creative, Can-Do Culture</strong>: Administrative encouragement of students who want to organize new clubs and initiatives. Gives students hands-on practice in mobilizing, organizing, messaging.</td>
<td><strong>Constraints on Political Participation and Lack of Critical Mass of Co-Nationals among International Students</strong>: Foreign students are not permitted to participate in many forms of political engagement in Singapore. Concerns that foreign students will undermine the causes they care about if they are too vocal, making those causes seem like “imported” rather than real Singaporean issues. Inability of foreign students from less well represented nationalities to find collaborators from their home countries with which to engage.</td>
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Education (CAPE) has a very instructive website providing information and analysis on “big ideas” and tracking important features of local politics. It offers information and context not readily available elsewhere and has, therefore, become a resource cited in local media.

At the same time, limits on political action beyond the college’s gates shape student’s goals and strategies. It is easy to form spaces for discussion and to find peers and get college support to start identity collectives, debates, and discussion groups. As one student described, at Yale-NUS “there are lots of opportunities to talk about issues, no matter how radical. But at times it feels very difficult to translate that to action.” In a political context where students cannot freely howl at the moon, they must be quite strategic and nuanced in their approach. In particular, students use the college administration as a target for mobilization efforts, a sort of practice-round with more permissive norms around speech and activism.

Many of the students we spoke to who experienced barriers to political engagement either because of constraints on political advocacy in Singapore, lack of a critical mass of co-nationals (in the case of international students), or other barriers, chose to direct advocacy efforts towards Yale-NUS as an institution. One example is the student divestment campaign, Fossil Free Yale-NUS. Students also contribute to policy development at the College, through curriculum reviews, student government initiatives, and through representation on high-level committees. As one student shared: “Another barrier for international students is just the lack of knowledge and living experience of this place [Singapore]... How could I stand up and speak for this group or defend freedom of speech in Singapore, when I just came here for college? So for me, most of my engagements or concerns are more targeted at the College.” The implication here is that if highly multinational educational institutions want students to develop the communicative and organizational skills that underpin civic engagement, they need to let the college or university itself serve as the canvas (and even the target) of student organizing.

Within the College, interaction between classes, extra-curricular programs, and the residential life system offers students opportunities to hone their goals in terms of social and political change and determine how to pursue those goals across different political climates. To that end, while operating within a less liberal political climate, Yale-NUS maintains a facilitative campus climate, providing students with ample opportunities to develop their interests and space for experimentation, allowing them to develop repertoires that work at Yale-NUS and in their home countries. Civic engagement education can thrive in less liberal contexts if educators and administrators create culturally responsive, socially supportive, and intellectually immersive campus and classroom climates.37

Endnotes

1. Gratitude and Acknowledgements: As with all the contributors, we conducted this research during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it even more meaningful to study students’ experience and goals in terms of civic engagement and community service. In this challenging time, we were extremely fortunate to have assistance executing this project. We had terrific editors who reviewed multiple drafts and helped us to sharpen the work. We wish to thank our research assistants Hanna Wdzieczak, Nahian Chowdhury, and Yuen En Ning Grace. Grace worked with us throughout the project and was tremendously helpful and efficient under tight time pressures. Our thanks also to colleagues at and beyond Yale-NUS who provided feedback on earlier drafts, especially Lynette Chua, Trisha Craig, Fiona Soh, and Claire Timperley. Above all we are grateful to students who participated in our research and generously shared their experiences, insights, and aspirations.


4. This may be why during the most recent Singapore General Election, a prestigious junior college (secondary education serving mostly 17- and 18-year-olds) sent an advisory asking all students to avoid posting anything related to the election on social media. According to the school’s spokesperson, “it is the school’s position that social media is not a suitable platform for students to be discussing their views on national issues, especially during an election period...We certainly do not want our students to be apathetic regarding national issues. But because of their youth, we also do not want them to be inadvertently embroiled in agendas beyond their control.” See Rei Kurohi, “Singapore GE2020: Hwa Chong Defends Advice to Students to Not Discuss Election on Social Media,” The Straits Times (July 4, 2020). https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-ge2020-hwa-chong-defends-advice-to-students-to-not-discuss-election-on-social.


6. Participants were nearly equally divided between international (11) and local (14) students, a category that includes Singapore citizens and permanent residents. The international student participants hailed from Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, North America, and South America. Participants represented the following majors: Politics, Philosophy and Economics; Environmental Studies; Law and Liberal Arts; Life Sciences; Economics; Anthropology; Philosophy; and Mathematical, Computational and Statistical Science (MCS). First year and second year participants are undeclared, as Yale-NUS students only select a major at the end of their second year. Due to space constraints, we were not able to share all salient comments and excerpts from our focus groups or textual analysis. We have endeavoured to select the most illuminating and representative data.


14. The internal 2013 report on the Common Curriculum submitted by the inaugural Curriculum Committee of the College states this as a clear objective: “[T]he particular context of Singapore is one in which a certain amount of cosmopolitanism is a necessary part of responsible citizenship... many of our students will find themselves facing new opportunities for participation in civil society and politics. Given the conjunction of civilizations and cultures in the city and the region, responsible citizenship will require increasingly resilient habits of productive engagement across traditional civilization boundaries.” See Curriculum Committee of Yale-NUS College, Yale-NUS College: A New Community of Learning (Singapore: Yale-NUS College, 2013).

15. Ibid, 25.


18. In describing his transition from working at NUS to becoming Executive Vice President (Provost) of Yale-NUS College, Tan noted the cultural difference: “In NUS, things were a lot more settled... [There], the hierarchy is very established, and the culture of the place also. Because if I had a view and I go to the Provost, the Provost disagrees, I have to accept that he’s a Provost, he has the final say. Over here [at Yale-NUS], people may not treat you the same way. They say that if I don’t agree with you, you have to persuade me to agree with you. It’s not that just because you are EVP everything you say, goes. That’s the culture of this place.” See Tan 2016, 19.


30. Only Singapore citizens can engage in “Internet Election Advertising,” defined as “any material that can reasonably be regarded as intended to promote or procure the electoral success at any election for one or more identifiable political parties, candidates or groups of candidates...” This includes election advertising published on websites, social media platforms, chat rooms or discussion forums, content sharing services, or published using email, instant messaging services, SMS services or MMS services.” This includes unpaid “advertising.” The list of prohibitions can be found at https://www.eld.gov.sg/faq_candidates.html.


of public order-related offences, or who are working with political advocacy groups funded by foreigners, or who openly show disloyalty to Singapore.”


37. The National University of Singapore Institutional Review Board approved this research.