Conceptualizing Civic Education and Engagement in Less Liberal Contexts

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Civic engagement education has often been associated with promoting and protecting liberal democracy. What does civic engagement education entail in less liberal or illiberal political contexts? In this chapter, we use the lens of “campus climate” to describe ways that broader political-legal contexts (macroclimates), organizational contexts of universities or colleges (mesoclimates), and localized settings within the college, e.g., residential halls and classrooms (microclimates) combine to facilitate or stymie civic engagement education. Using Singapore as an illustration, we describe formal legal restrictions and implicit norms that constitute macroclimatic barriers to certain types of civic engagement. To foster productive microclimates for civic education in this context, we encourage educators to emphasize community engagement in addition to political activism, inquiry and service over confrontational change-making, and communitarian/collectivist over exclusively liberal/individualized political approaches. To develop these claims, we introduce a short case study of Yale-NUS College in Singapore. Our case study indicates that, through the provision of a facilitative campus climate, there are robust opportunities for civic engagement education in less liberal contexts. A more in-depth case study of civic engagement education at Yale-NUS College is then presented in section III, with findings from focus groups and content analyses.

KEYWORDS: Civic Education; Higher Education; Electoral Authoritarianism; Post-Colonial Politics; Singapore; Campus Climate.

Introduction

Higher education in the liberal arts and sciences has gone global.¹ National liberal arts institutions can be found across the globe, such as Ashesi University in Ghana, Lingnan University in Hong Kong, Ashoka University in India, and US-based small liberal arts colleges like Swarthmore, Williams, Amherst, Kenyon, and Wellesley. Additionally, in recent years transnational institutions and branch campuses such as Duke-Kunshan, NYU-Abu Dhabi, and Yale-NUS College have swelled the ranks of liberal arts colleges and universities throughout the world.

As the liberal arts model spreads, some newer institutions have grappled with fundamental questions of promoting the liberal arts in less liberal countries.² High-profile incidents involving
these various institutions have caused concerns about their ability to protect academic freedom, expansive education, and critical discussions, which are hallmarks of the liberal arts model. In 2015, for example, an NYU professor who is a fierce critic of the labor policies in the United Arab Emirates was barred from entering the country. The specter of official censorship has continued to haunt branch campuses in China. In fact, the authors’ own institution, Yale-NUS College, faced controversy due to a last-minute cancellation of an experiential learning short course on dissent in Singapore because of fears that it was going to involve students violating local laws regarding protest and assembly. Inevitably, these controversies have stoked questions about the viability of implementing liberal education in countries without strong liberal arts traditions, and by extension, of teaching civic engagement in less liberal political contexts.

As educators at Yale-NUS since 2014 and 2018 respectively, we are well-positioned to offer insights into how civic engagement education has developed and can develop within a less liberal polity and how civic engagement might develop in similarly situated institutions. In this chapter, we offer conceptual tools for understanding civic education and sociopolitical engagement in less liberal contexts. While many of these observations will be applicable across a range of political regime types and cultural contexts, we draw heavily from our own experience as non-Singaporeans teaching in Singaporean higher education. Our observations are relevant for all educators who are considering civic education in less liberal settings and those who are working outside their cultural comfort zones, such as educators working at international institutions or branch campuses outside their country of origin.

In this chapter, we deploy the lens of “campus climate” to frame our argument on how the broader political-legal context (the macroclimate), the organizational context (the mesoclimate), and localized settings within the college (microclimates) combine to facilitate and complicate the pedagogy of civic engagement. Campus climate refers to “a complex ecosystem of interconnected structural, cultural, human, and political factors that affect college student learning.” Several authors have noted that it is critical for encouraging students’ political learning and engagement, because campus climate shapes prevailing attitudes, behaviors, standards, and practices of the members of an institution, which in turn determine the academic experiences of individual students. While existing literature on campus climate has successfully flagged crucial elements facilitating civic engagement among students, it has failed to take into account the specific experiences of universities, particularly liberal arts institutions, in illiberal settings. Our contribution here therefore seeks to build on the recent increase in global liberal arts institutions and correct this regional lacuna.

Furthermore, campus climate tends to be assessed by scholars at the organizational level, understating both the macro (the sociopolitical context) and the micro (everyday sociospatial environments within the campus). Recognizing that there may be diverse experiences based on the students’ social group identities (such as race, gender, class, etc.), Vaccaro suggests that the organizational-level environment of an institution is constituted by multiple “microclimates.” These micro-sociospatial environments encompass the classroom, dining area, residence hall, and shared sport facilities, essentially “localized, physical settings where daily interpersonal interactions [shape] people’s perceptions and experiences.” Even though the importance of political context is acknowledged, works on campus climate in the American context tend to characterize the political environment as mere “external forces” or “stakeholders” with whom institutional leaders negotiate. But in less liberal contexts, the blatant intrusion of political forces into the campus is often a plausible scenario. For example, in 2014, a Malaysian university literally locked the gates to prevent the political opposition leader from delivering his scheduled lecture on campus grounds. Similarly, in 2016, democracy activist Joshua Wong was detained and deported by Thai authorities, preventing him from speaking to Chulalongkorn University students.

Thus, to better capture the institutional experiences in less liberal contexts, we (re)center the macro-political environment and microclimates in the discussion below. Because liberal arts education and institutions in less liberal contexts are often not well understood by policymakers and the public, they may be subject to intense political and media scrutiny. Particular liberal principles
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and politicized forms of engagement may be viewed as “foreign,” if not illegal, and therefore undesirable in host societies. For example, in addition to becoming a topic of national parliamentary debate, a former member of Singapore’s parliament wrote on the national broadsheet that the Yale-NUS short course on dissent risked fomenting a “color revolution.” Thus, free and safe spaces for exploring political ideas and practices on campus—which speak to the microclimates—are a precondition for effective civic learning. This in turn is contingent on how institutional leaders navigate their responsibility in ensuring productive relations with the host government in order to preserve a campus climate that is facilitative of student civic engagement.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, we argue for the importance of taking political context and culture, the macro-climate, into account when designing civic engagement education. Second, we narrow our scope to a particular category of political context: less liberal polities. We contend that to effectively foster civic education under such political climates, the construct of “civic engagement” needs to be reconceptualized and globalized. Specifically, civic education in less liberal contexts tends to emphasize social and community engagement over political activism, inquiry and service over confrontational change-making, and communitarian/collectivist over exclusively liberal/individualized political approaches. Third, we introduce a short case study of Yale-NUS College in Singapore. After describing some key features of the Singaporean political context, we review early criticisms of Yale-NUS. Then, we engage with condemnations that an institution located in Singapore would not be able to foster true civic engagement in part because it could not guarantee total academic freedom. Our case study indicates that, despite these concerns, through the provision of a facilitative campus climate, there are still robust opportunities for civic engagement education in less liberal contexts. This chapter sets the stage for a more in-depth case study of civic engagement education at Yale-NUS College presented in section III. There we share findings from several focus groups and content analyses conducted by the authors in 2020.

Why Context Matters For Civic Education

For educators who strive to teach and encourage civic engagement, attention to context is critical. For those like the authors who are teaching outside their own country of origin, it is especially important to learn the formal and hidden rules of political engagement, speech, and activism in the countries in which they operate. This knowledge is essential not only for risk management, but to identify opportunities for learning and diagnose possible sources of resistance among students to their assignments and pedagogy.

In particular, for educators who were raised or educated in highly liberal democratic political environments, it is important to think critically about what it means to teach civic engagement in less liberal political contexts. First, such educators should start by problematizing overly-simplistic and often xenophobic distinctions of regime types between democratic and authoritarian that may have been part of their upbringing. Most regimes are shades of grey. A more nuanced view helps educators to appreciate new opportunities for civic engagement education in less liberal contexts. Taking a less dichotomous view may also help us to identify novel approaches to political education in self-proclaimed bastions of liberal democracy like the US and France, where growing public and scholarly attention to systemic inequalities and anti-democratic political tactics may signal the need for new approaches to civic engagement education. Second, educators who were trained in Western liberal democracies and are now operating in less liberal contexts need to critically reflect on their goals and approaches to civic engagement education. What works in North America, for example, may not be appropriate or impactful in less liberal environments where there are different rules of the game and cultural norms in terms of political expression and action.

In politically more liberal societies where barriers to political involvement are low and checks on the government are relatively high, the common social obstacles to civic engagement for college students are apathy, ignorance, and lack of incentives and opportunities to get involved. As such, civic education in the American frame has traditionally focused on promoting “civic engagement” through four pathways:
1. Enhancing students’ *understanding* of political institutions and processes.
2. Enhancing students’ *interest* in social and political issues.
3. Encouraging more active *participation* in the political process.
4. Empowering students with *skills* to take action within those institutions and on those issues they care about.

Less liberal societies have higher institutional and normative barriers to civic participation and fewer constraints on the government. In such a context, the challenge for civic engagement education is not just to promote greater understanding and action. It is to make students feel safe and secure admitting to an interest in politics and societal change in the first place, let alone acquiring deeper knowledge about civic engagement strategies. In more liberal democracies there is an expectation of frequent and peaceful political change. In less liberal states, the status quo is not as likely to be frequently reimaged and challenged in popular discourse.

In less liberal contexts like Singapore, for example, there is no partisan political campaigning on campus. More generally, overtly political civic engagement education can appear and feel subversive, even if the goal of such education is not to destabilize the status quo per se, but instead to understand how to work within the system to achieve positive societal outcomes. This is a very different context than, for example, the United States and many parts of Europe where participating in organized political protest and overt activism is seen as a rite of passage, a “bucket-list” entry in the university experience.

Other than formal political constraints, culture may also have an impact on the public support for democratic institutions and ideas—an issue that remains actively debated by scholars. For instance, while Brunkert, Kruze, and Welzel contend that “emancipative values” or beliefs in universal freedoms especially in the West have helped to anchor democracy, others such as Dalton and Ong have pushed back against claims that Asian orientations toward authority are an impediment to democracy. But insofar as there is a relationship between political institutions and culture, education systems in societies that tend to be more deferential to authority are less likely to encourage students to challenge established norms, institutions, or individuals with power and legitimacy. This context contrasts with the mainstay learning goal of most civic engagement educational models in the Anglo-American tradition: to empower students to challenge conventional wisdom and assert themselves vis-à-vis existing authority structures.

For these reasons alone, context matters, and civic engagement education will take different forms. Civic engagement education in the Singapore context may in some ways look similar to and in other respects be much more limited than in an American or Western European context. Similarities might include assigning research projects and structured debates within the classroom on contemporary political issues. However, professors in less liberal contexts are unlikely to encourage students to engage in behaviors which may be illegal like organizing a street protest. Professors may even shy away from encouraging students to write politically-charged opinion articles for the local paper or creating a public course blog if there are risks of government retaliation.

However, civic engagement is not reducible to combative political activism and road-closing protests. Further, conventional Western-informed notions of civic engagement often deliberately and explicitly link civic education to the mission of fostering liberal visions of democracy. Indeed, the introductory chapters of the previous *Teaching Civic Engagement* volumes invoke the call of creating and sustaining democracy within the first two paragraphs. But how should we conduct civic education in a context where “democracy,” as well as other adjacent terms such as “civil society,” “rule of law” and “political engagement,” are deeply contested?

It is worth remembering that civic engagement is also built upon imagination, courage, community-building, and community-tending, which can be taught in many different ways within a less liberal environment. Thus, in order to accommodate various political and cultural considerations, this chapter reframes “civic engagement education” as a more inclusive concept that is focused on the basics and appeals to universal sentiments: *identifying, creating, and maintaining spaces where students can develop knowledge and an interest in social and political issues and engage in genuine*
conversation, ideation, and disagreement within their local or national contexts. These are perhaps the most important and foundational elements for civic education that can be useful to reference in less liberal and more authoritarian contexts and, perhaps, may even be instructive in the increasingly untethered and polarized context of the United States as well.

Conceptualizing Civic Engagement Education In Less Liberal Contexts

Before we get to the pertinent question of teaching civic engagement, how should we conceptualize civic engagement in less liberal contexts? After all, barriers to political expression and action vary across time and space, and civic engagement takes on different manifestations accordingly. Some of these constraints are explicit and legal (e.g., whether one is allowed to host representatives of political parties on campus), while often the greatest constraints are implicit and social (e.g., will students or parents complain if teachers discuss socio-economic inequality, electoral politics, racism, heteronormativity, or sexism in the classroom).

To understand and pursue civic education in less liberal contexts, we ought to first globalize the meaning of “civic engagement education” so that we have purchase on that concept when operating in differently-constrained political and cultural environments. In other words, we need to address the meta-context which may well determine the scope and contents of civic engagement education. As we will discuss below, producing change-making agents is not impossible in less liberal settings. But to be relevant in such environments, civic engagement education needs to be more inclusive and imaginative, encompassing 1) social and community engagement in addition to political change; 2) critical inquiry in addition to active change-making; 3) communitarian views in addition to liberal views about state and civil society.

In other words, we are not proposing a wholesale redesign of civic education. Rather, we reject the underlying assumptions of an implicit hierarchy that has long informed Anglo-American civic engagement pedagogies, one that sets political engagement apart from service and volunteerism. While sharing Facebook posts, signing petitions, and volunteering may seem “thin” and “shallow” in the Western context, in a less liberal context, these actions may be politically contentious and risk provoking state reprisal. Additionally, despite the foreclosure of many options for political engagement, we point out that deliberation and social engagement can and have plausibly prefigured sustained commitment among students toward more “political” undertakings.

Indeed, low voter turnout among youths in the West has repeatedly been cited as reason for rethinking civic education. Hence, current theorizing on civic engagement activities often pertains to political participation, while civil society is typically seen as the natural realm for civic action. Extant scholarship tends to also focus on the liberal West. Put simply, in US-centric or Euro-centric civic engagement literature, this concept has often been treated as synonymous with voting, civil society, and activism. Even within the US-centric literature, there is a lack of consensus as to what counts as civic engagement. A frequently cited definition suggests that it entails an “active citizen” participating “in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future.” This term can describe non-political voluntary service, such as getting involved in community associations and events, which include charities, clubs, religious organizations, and local gatherings. It can also describe political participation and involvement, essentially collective efforts that demand government action, encompassing voting, lobbying, campaigning, and demonstrations. And according to Peterson, active citizenship should ideally be a balance of both political and community participation.

In liberal contexts, civic education is imbued with the Putnamian thesis that enhancing civic participation among young citizens consolidates democracy. Fesnic has investigated this phenomena in the context of post-communist countries, showing that while Poland’s democratic progress owes partly to its robust civic education, democratic backsliding in Hungary has been
partly a result of poor civic education. Civic education has also been refashioned in multicultural nation-states in North America and Western Europe to promote an inclusive citizenship among a diverse population. For example, to ameliorate public concerns over integration and social alienation of minorities, which reached xenophobic levels in the early 21st century due to instances of radicalization and terrorist recruitment among Muslim youths, European governments redoubled civic education efforts to instill so-called “national values” in minorities and immigrant students. While the French civic education model emphasized republican values, the Swedish model took on a more pluralistic approach that centered social democratic principles such equal rights for minorities. Recent iterations of civic education curricula have focused on intercultural dialogue and social responsibility.

In less-liberal countries like Singapore which have regular elections but limits on speech and political activity, civic engagement education is essentially an effort to disseminate engagement, attentiveness, and critical thinking within the parameters of a less liberal state. As Noori elaborates, there are legitimate concerns about the ways in which Western universities and their branch campuses may harbor implicit and explicit political and cultural biases that may be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism. Even in newly democratized Taiwan, authoritarian residues, coupled with conservative cultural restraints, have kept educators from discussing their political agenda and activism with students in the classroom, partly because protests are seen to contradict the Confucian dictum of self-restraint. In these contexts, there are palpable tensions between staying true to the core tenets of liberal education and attending to particular aspects of local politics, culture, and preferences. In any case, tactics for teaching civic engagement must shift to ensure a culturally resonant student experience. For example, in liberal settings, teaching civic engagement using “drive-by” participation—limited and risk-averse forms of engagement—is seen as inferior to more sustained, time-consuming, and transformative forms of civic engagement. However, in less liberal educational contexts, these “drive-by” experiences may necessarily be a best practice and a way to acculturate students who are less comfortable with overt political engagement. After all, in these contexts, these educational institutions are often sites where their once rich history of campus activism has been abruptly—and sometimes violently—discontinued. For example, in post-Tiananmen Chinese universities, Enlightenment values have been rejected in favor of state values, generating “educated acquiescence” among faculty, staff and students. In Malaysia and Singapore, due also to past state control measures, student activism had been effectively contained and is now often discussed in past tense among historians.

To be sure, in many less-liberal contexts in East and Southeast Asia, elements of a more liberal and cosmopolitan conception of civic education have been incorporated into the local educational culture. For example, China’s primary and secondary school citizenship curricula have been revised to incorporate “global” perspectives, such as global awareness of interdependence and peaceful development. Similarly, secondary school citizenship education in Indonesia and Malaysia addresses human rights topics and references “global community building.” However, such government initiatives to introduce notions of global citizenship into the national curricula are largely responses to economic globalization. Civic education is often unmoored from its liberal principles and transplanted onto a predominantly hierarchical, uncritical framework of knowledge transmission. State-approved civic education is therefore akin to a conveyor belt that produces “well-rounded” students who will be loyal to the state and more productive and competitive in the global market. This general approach regards education mainly as training for the economy, which is historically associated with the region’s postcolonial catch-up trajectory.

Further, postcolonial state anxieties about nation-building have rendered civic education an ideal vehicle for fostering national identity. In Singapore, for example, the government’s call for Singaporeans to be actively involved in community work is couched in a vision of forging a “Singapore soul.” Put simply, while conversations about civic education in the West tend to center on youth apathy to the political process, it is apathy to the nation that concerns counterparts in many less liberal, post-colonial contexts. Arguably, for the postcolonial state, civic education is a project of political socialization and nation-solidification. In that vein, civic education models in postcolo-
nial states tend to be inflected with “idealized notions of the state,” marginalizing cosmopolitan and social activism discourses that are integral to the Anglo-American praxis of civic engagement.

Also, in less liberal contexts, there are deliberate ambiguities surrounding what constitutes “politics,” “civil society,” and “active citizenship.” In China, for instance, “civil society” was once a widely accepted notion during the 2000s, before becoming politically sensitive in 2011 due to Arab Spring-inspired calls for a “Jasmine revolution.” The politically preferred term for “civil society groups” in China now is “social organizations” or “non-profit organizations.” In Singapore, the term “civic society,” promulgated in 1991 by government minister George Yeo, is preferred to “civil society.” In addition to an emphasis on civic responsibilities as opposed to individual rights, “civic society” signals expectations that voluntary organizations ought to work with rather than against the government. The appropriate relationship governing state and society, therefore, revolves around “constructive partnerships.” With the “potentially de-stabilizing ‘politicking’ of civil society” pre-empted, civic society groups, the junior partner of the relationship, are expected to direct their energies toward voluntarism and consultation. As Lee adds, the idea is to “keep citizens occupied in activities that are deemed civic, gracious and kind so that they would keep a safe distance away from real political activities such as political lobbying, protests, campaigning, or even politically induced violence.” According to Ho, Sim, and Alviar-Martin, this idea has trickled down to secondary school citizenship education, as students are exhorted to be “gracious” and “law-abiding” and refrain from questioning the wider socio-political structures. These are specific features of civic education in the Singaporean context, but illustrate the importance of understanding the implicit boundaries for political engagement when designing civic engagement education.

Attention to context specifically reveals two important traits of civic engagement in less liberal contexts. First, the distinction between political and apolitical is not a theoretical exercise. It captures the legal and ideological boundaries that the authorities may enforce over active citizenship. In less liberal settings, there is likely to be a more entrenched and consequential delineation between those who are politically engaged and those who are not. The net result is greater attention to service and volunteerism due to their alignment with dominant values and a disinclination toward critical political involvement among educators and students. Deepening and enriching civic education in less liberal contexts requires broadening our imagination for how engagement may look and a better understanding of the kinds of spaces in which it can be enacted. Recognizing these constraints and possibilities across different contexts, educators can be creative in their use of varied media and learning activities to inculcate civic engagement.

Second, instead of diffusing a cosmopolitan, justice-centric viewpoint, nationally mandated civic engagement education in less liberal contexts may be instrumentalized to instill students with a parochial and nationalistic outlook that affirms the official line. Given the bias towards “the safe and the status quo,” deference to authority is reinforced rather than questioned. Yet, while civic education in less liberal contexts is expected to act as a socializing force, it is possible for professors to turn it into a site for counter-socialization, “a platform for students to think about the root causes of problems, and challenge existing social, economic, and political norms as a way to strengthen society.” Despite pressures to strip the civic engagement concept of its political undertones, teaching civic engagement and seeding “change agents” is still possible in the relatively circumscribed public sphere of less liberal settings. To that end, the pedagogy and praxis of civic engagement should be “culturally relevant” by grounding itself in the students’ social opportunities and drawing on discourses from the students’ home environment. In other words, civic engagement education can include an interweaving of the familiar and unfamiliar.

To that end, it is useful to call upon the idea of “political space.” As Hansson and Weiss argue, “political space,” both in its material and discursive manifestations, helps avoid some of the pitfalls of the liberal state-civil society thesis. Specifically, it resists rigid dichotomies (civil versus political, institutional versus non-institutional, physical versus virtual), as well as the impossible ideal of an “independent” space in less liberal contexts. Political space, in that vein, speaks to an existing space that “overlaps state, government and civil society.” Moreover, it is congruent with the notions of “free spaces” in social movement theory and “spaces of hope” in urban geography.
These sites are capable of facilitating the constitution of collective actors and identity, as well as the pursuit of alternative politics, thereby generating the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies progressive social change.\textsuperscript{61}

Indeed, political space, or free spaces more broadly, may be a taken-for-granted dimension of teaching civic engagement. And in less liberal settings especially, such free spaces have remarkable salience as 1) sites of socialization; 2) organizing spaces; and 3) spaces of experimentation with and pursuit of alternative ideas. The maintenance of free spaces for civic learning, the microclimates, in turn, relies on the wider campus climate, which is how the university administration understands and promotes student civic engagement.

That there are ever-present free spaces—microclimates—even in unexpected places suggests that civic engagement education in less liberal states—the macroclimates—is far from a mirage in a desert. Civic engagement educators must therefore not only seek out these spaces, but also vigilantly preserve them so that a stable foundation can be laid for collective (re)imagination and community-building. With that in place, educators can then confidently—and safely—articulate an inclusive and culturally relevant civic engagement vocabulary, one that interweaves social and political engagement, inquiry and change-making, communitarian and liberal worldviews—the familiar and the unfamiliar.

**Liberal Arts Education In A Less Liberal Context: Highest Hopes Or Worst Fears Realized?**

To make this conceptual discussion more concrete, we now introduce a case study of specific efforts to encourage civic engagement in a less liberal context. First, we introduce key features of the Singaporean regime. Next, we describe ways that Yale-NUS College in Singapore has created “free spaces” for civic education and engagement while being attentive to the Singaporean social-political context.

**An Illustrative Macroclimate: Singapore Political and Cultural Context**

Within Singapore, the country is referred to as a democracy, and it does hold competitive elections. In Singapore, voting is compulsory, and turnout is very high. In fact, in the 2020 general election, the opposition Workers’ Party gained more seats than ever before, leading the country’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to formally confer Workers’ Party leader Pritam Singh the title of “Leader of the Opposition.”\textsuperscript{62} As reported by the BBC, this was “the first time any opposition leader in Singapore has been considered relevant enough to hold the post.”\textsuperscript{63}

Even so, the governing party, People’s Action Party (PAP) has won a comfortable majority of seats (89% of the total) as well as a respectable popular vote share of 61%. Since the country’s first general election in 1959, the popular vote for PAP has never been below 60% and as such, the PAP has been in government for 62 years. It is therefore on track of matching the record of Mexico’s Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as the world’s longest continuously ruling party in an electoral democracy by 2030—an extremely likely event. Clearly, although opposition parties have seized a toehold in the parliamentary system, the PAP still enjoys significant and heavily fortified incumbency advantages. Recent findings suggest that Singaporean voters actually “sincerely” support the PAP because the party has been widely perceived to be credible for ensuring economic growth, social stability, national security, and the efficient delivery of local services.\textsuperscript{64} Singapore has one of the world’s highest GDP per capita, and according to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Safe Cities Index, it is the second-safest city in the world.\textsuperscript{65} More than 80% of the population lives in Singapore’s public housing units.

Political scientists, however, have drawn significant attention to the hegemonic control imposed by the government in Singapore, using terms such as “paternalistic,”\textsuperscript{66} “patriarchal,”\textsuperscript{67} “soft authoritarian,”\textsuperscript{68} “electoral autocracy,”\textsuperscript{69} and “consultative authoritarianism”\textsuperscript{70} to describe Singapore’s regime. They have typically located Singapore in the middle of the regime type continuum,
neither a liberal democracy nor an archetypal authoritarian regime. For many political scientists and human rights NGOs, free, fair, and regular elections are a baseline for democracy, and “liberal democracy” is used to refer to regimes with relatively high constraints or checks on government actors and independent judiciaries and extensive press and media freedom. Additionally, liberal democracies are those where individual rights and freedoms are more fiercely protected in part to counter majority tyranny. In liberal regimes, there are low barriers to citizens’ speech, organizing, and activism. Hence, Freedom House has rated Singapore as “partly free,” noting that the political system has permitted “some political pluralism” despite limits on freedoms of expression, assembly and association. Large-scale data-sets like V-Dem, Polity-5, and The Economist’s Democracy Index also place Singapore roughly in the middle of regimes worldwide in terms of democratic institutions.

Both the media and civil society groups are subjected to close state scrutiny. Major media outlets are owned by companies linked to the government and sometimes headed by former government ministers. In addition, PAP ministers have at times filed defamation suits against opposition politicians and political commentators for slander and libel. Singapore thus ranks a lowly 160th on the 2021 World Press Freedom Index. There are significant limitations on political speech and assembly. Except in a demarcated space in a public park called Hong Lim Park (not unlike the Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park), public acts of protest are illegal. Under the Public Order Act, a police permit is mandatory for any “cause-related” assembly that is held in a public place or in a private venue if members of the general public are invited. Non-citizens, non-Permanent Residents, and non-local entities are barred from sponsoring and participating in public assemblies.

Local activists have in the past been fined or sentenced to prison for organizing peaceful protests and candlelight vigils without proper permits. Most recently, in January 2021 three students were arrested for assembling without a proper permit when they held signs against transphobia on the sidewalk outside the Ministry of Education. In 2019 the government passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), which regulates the digital dissemination of “fake news.” Advocates say the law will protect the country from adversaries’ attempts to erode Singaporean cohesion. Critics say the law was deployed to censor online voices from independent media and opposition politicians ahead of the 2020 general election.

In addition to formal rules which limit protest and political organizing, prevalent social discourse emphasizes the social and economic vulnerability of Singapore because it is a relatively young, very small, multi-racial, and multi-religious country. Domestic tranquility has historically been seen as an essential condition for the economic growth which keeps the relatively new, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation whole. Additionally, part of the discourse of vulnerability stems from Singapore’s status as a “red dot”—a city state of less than six million majority ethnically Chinese residents surrounded by extremely populous (and non-Chinese, majority Muslim) states. Calling attention to potentially divisive issues can be seen as not only counter-cultural but even potentially a threat to national security if it destabilizes the country from within. In other words, Singapore’s conservative culture may serve as a potent barrier to particular forms of civic engagement alongside formal restrictions on political organizing and assembly.

Singapore’s “civic society” thesis envisions the family, as opposed to individuals, as the basic unit of society, therefore entrenching a communitarian “common sense” that is antithetical to liberalism in the population. To shore up that worldview, families receive preferential treatment over single individuals in the government’s public housing allocations. The overarching discourse is that a high priority is placed on social stability, the greater good of the collective, and the need to avoid anything that might destabilize the country. As a result, the bar of what constitutes confrontational tactics is lower, and political rhetoric is often treated as uncivil, divisive, and un-Singaporean. Some who embrace overt social and legal change and who are described as activists have been painted as having been corrupted or co-opted by “foreign influence” and “foreign agendas.” Moreover, in the past, the government has used local cultural justification to silence criticisms. For example, government ministers have chastised critics with Confucianist idioms for not showing respect for authority and cited “religious sensitivity” as a reason for institutionalizing
continued LGBT inequality. This may serve to deter and stymie political opposition.

On the other hand, there are increasing signs of political liberalization. Besides the rise in electoral competition noted above, mildly politically contentious issues that ranged from gender equity, LGBT rights, and migrant labor exploitation to biodiversity and heritage conservation have seen significant public attention and advocacy in recent years. There are a number of very active local non-profit groups advocating for social as well as political change on behalf of women (e.g., AWARE) and transgender/gender queer Singaporeans (e.g., T Project and Oogachaga), migrant workers (e.g., TWC2), and the environment (e.g., SG Climate Rally).

In the chapter thus far, we have identified certain forces that influence civic engagement education in Singapore: formal legal limitations on overtly political action and social norms that encourage deference to authority, consensus, and tradition. Every national, regional, and cultural context will have nuances and complications that need to be thought through in developing effective civic engagement education. To operate productively in this particular political and cultural context, where activism can be painted as dangerous and anti-Singaporean, civic engagement often takes a different set of tactics and distinct rhetoric. The norms we have described are not ubiquitous in Singapore, but they are prevalent features of the local macroclimate and will influence the topics and tactics of civic education at the meso- and micro-level of Singapore universities and classrooms. In the next section of this chapter we move to the mesoclimate of a particular institution, Yale-NUS College.

Yale-NUS College: Liberal Arts and Sciences in Singapore

Having briefly described key features of the Singaporean political and social context, we now discuss how Yale-NUS College has approached civic engagement education in this environment.

Founded in 2011, Yale-NUS College opened to students in 2013. It is a fully residential, undergraduate-serving college with a four-year liberal arts and sciences curriculum. It is a semi-autonomous college within the National University of Singapore (NUS) system, forged in partnership and closely tied to both Yale University and NUS. It is the first college of its kind in Southeast Asia, a regional context where discipline-specific and pre-professional higher education is the norm and fully-residential tertiary education is rare.

From the college’s earliest days, concerns emerged regarding two related issues: (1) whether faculty and students would enjoy full academic freedom and (2) whether the college could be a space for civic engagement and genuine social-political education. Upon Yale-NUS’ opening, the American Association of University Professors released “An Open Letter to the Yale Community” expressing “growing concern about the character and impact of the university’s collaboration with the Singaporean government in establishing Yale-National University of Singapore College,” especially its implications for academic freedom and educational standards. Several faculty members at Yale were opposed to and continue to oppose Yale lending its name due to concerns that the College would not be able to protect student and faculty speech, academic freedom, and non-discrimination. Some observers expressed skepticism as to how interrogatory, critical academic freedom could be practiced in the Singapore context.

Yale-NUS might appear caught in a balancing act between fostering engagement among students without encouraging law-breaking. However, for many on “the inside,” balance is an appropriate adaptation to the Singaporean context. Yale-NUS’ second president and former Singapore parliamentarian Tan Tai Yong reflected on these early criticisms: “we knew we cannot—if we had a liberal arts college here—you cannot have illegal assembly or marches. These are things that are just dictated by Singapore laws but that does not mean that students here cannot discuss topics which the Singapore government may not be comfortable about.”

Operating within the law while engaging in free-ranging discussion on all social and political issues is explicitly articulated in college materials. For example, the college’s first Student Handbook in 2013 noted that students: “Are encouraged to debate political ideas and those ideas should filter into and out of the classroom. [Students] can and should debate everything from capitalism versus communism... to the benefits and costs of a democracy versus a republic...”
Consistent with local law, partisan political campaigning and fund-raising are not permitted on campus, and attacking or disparaging another race, religion, or ethnicity is illegal. However, the first Student Handbook was clear that students “are encouraged to discuss all aspects of identity—race, religion, sexual orientation, etc... Indeed, it would be disappointing if these were not regular discussion topics inside and outside the classroom.” This context is echoed in the Faculty Statement on Freedom of Expression: “We are firmly committed to the free expression of ideas in all forms—a central tenet of liberal arts education. There are no questions that cannot be asked, no answers that cannot be discussed and debated. This principle is a cornerstone of our institution.”

Champions of the Yale-NUS project argue that there is a certain xenophobia and narrowly “American” view of freedom of speech lurking behind those who doubt the possibilities of a rigorous liberal arts college in Singapore. Some advocates of Yale-NUS take the view that it is engaged in the subtle task of building a new institution, inspired by an American educational model, without cultural imperialism. There is nothing a priori wrong, in this view, with taking local context into account in designing curriculum or pedagogy. One scholar notes that the very existence of Yale-NUS College highlights that learning goals like “critical thinking” may take on different meanings. “Instead of [exclusively inculcating] adversarial critical thinking, cooperative critical thinking... allows ample space for diversity of opinions, conciliation and relationship-building” and may be better suited to a Singapore-based institution.

As former Yale-NUS faculty members describe, “In the drama of academic freedom at Yale-NUS as staged in the global media, there has come to be something of a moral impasse between the two main protagonists, the Singapore government (as a spokesperson for postcolonial difference) and [critical faculty from] Yale (as an avatar of universal rights and freedoms).” For its most ardent critics, adaptation to local context makes Yale-NUS a sell-out. For its advocates, so long as core tenets of academic freedom within the College are preserved some adaptation is emblematic of what global education should be all about: learning to bridge diverse cultures and operate effectively across varied contexts. In this complicated milieu, the ability of the institution to promote civic engagement education becomes a critical test of its success, especially because civic engagement has been a core goal of Yale-NUS from its very beginning.

Yale-NUS’ Mandate: Civic Engagement from the Start

Years before Yale and NUS decided to partner, the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) identified a liberal arts college or pathway as a valuable addition to existing institutions of higher education in Singapore. The 2008 Committee on the Expansion of the University Sector in Singapore wrote of the link between liberal arts education and public service: “Liberal arts education serves to develop independent thinkers, effective communicators and potential leaders... independent and critical thinkers who can go on to become leaders in the economic, social and political fields.” The report also acknowledged that “some expressed the view that Singapore was not politically mature enough to accommodate the viewpoints of LAC [liberal arts college] faculty and students, which might sometimes be radical.” Nonetheless, the MOE ultimately moved forward, and Yale-NUS came into being.

In terms of its academic vision, from its outset the institution sought to inculcate skills and habits of mind that are building blocks for civic engagement: creative and critical thinking, articulate communication, and collaborative problem solving. A defining feature of Yale-NUS is the Common Curriculum featuring interdisciplinary courses that all students take at the same time and in the same order in their first two years. The inaugural president, Pericles Lewis, described the Common Curriculum as our answer to the question, “What must a young person learn in order to live a responsible life in this century?...A Yale-NUS education will create leaders who can adapt to diverse and challenging environments and who are well-placed to embrace the uncertainties of our future as active citizens of the world.” In a 2015 address to first-year students, Lewis said, “I hope that the education we provide at Yale-NUS will help you to develop both the intellectual and moral virtues to contribute actively to civic life within your immediate community and beyond... I trust that you will examine your own assumptions about the good life and the best way to live it. I
know that you will work together to cultivate a broad ethos of service.”

These statements reflect a central template underlying the design of the curriculum, with a focus on inculcating knowledge, values, and intellectual skills for civic engagement.

Yale-NUS is hardly unique in its rhetoric about developing global citizens. That has become mainstay brochure-talk across higher education. Part of what sets Yale-NUS apart in addition to its Common Curriculum is its truly global community. Just over half of the student body is Singaporean, and our international students are from over 70 countries worldwide.

Having a heavily international student body and faculty is directly linked to the civic educational goals of the institution. A high percentage of international students promotes civic ties and engagement not just within but across countries. For example, Lewis responded to one vocal opponent of the College, writing in *The New York Times*:

> How does he expect those countries to become more open if their students are denied the benefits of a liberal education and the attendant discussion of political issues on campus? While Mr. Sleeper seems to want to keep a liberal education from any supposed contamination by contact with different political regimes, progress actually depends on encounters with the unfamiliar, which are at the heart of a liberal education.

In this view, the College was anticipated to be a change agent through a liberal arts education that fosters “discussion of political issues” and enables civic engagement and change.

### 10 Years In: An Early Assessment

The establishment of a service-minded, politically engaged community has been a prime force behind the founding of Yale-NUS. Despite overt commitments to fostering civic engagement, questions have lingered as to whether these lofty aims can be achieved in a conservative, less liberal political context. Cheng Yi'En describes tensions between ideal and constrained action:

> The Yale-NUS brand of the adventurous, risk-taking, and socially engaged liberal arts educated citizen can be seen as a figure that embodies the contradictions between youth governance and autonomy in the city-state of Singapore. On the one hand, Yale-NUS students are encouraged to cultivate a deep sense of social awareness about everyday and global injustices as part of their training in critical thinking but on the other hand, the geographies of action (should students decide to act upon these injustices) are constantly curtailed by what is defined as permissible and what is not.

This delineation suggests that there is a tension between the permissive mesoclimate of the College and the somewhat more restrictive macroclimate of the Singaporean state and cultural landscape for political action.

The authors’ own experiences and research conducted on the student experience of the college suggests that Yale-NUS has been a site for civic engagement education (for more detail see chapter 13 in section 3). A rich interaction between the curricular, extra-curricular, and residential learning environments promotes different forms of engagement. Students learn habits of mind and communicative and organizational skills for life-long engagement. Moreover, because of its diverse student population, the institution inculcates a facilitative culture for students to learn about and partake in civic engagement.

At the same time, faculty-led and student-led civic engagement does indeed operate within the contours of Singapore’s legal system. Much of the student-led civic engagement we have observed is either 1) community building and community service as opposed to overly political involvement, or 2) directed at changing *college policies* rather than *national policies*.
In response to students’ change-making and activism directed at the college, current College President Tan Tai Yong stated:

If you want students to be inquisitive, we train our students that way, always question conventional wisdom, push the boundaries of knowledge, don’t take anything for granted, look at things from different perspectives and always be open to people who have different views from you... So if we do that, and then we don’t allow [student criticism/ public discourse] to happen then we are being hypocritical.\[110\]

In this vein, Yale-NUS students have orchestrated Take Back the Night events, Town Halls with senior administrators, and silent gatherings to demand new sexual misconduct policies and administrative transparency.\[111\] Students have used campus elevators to post provocative ideas and show support for sensitive political causes.\[112\] This focus on on-campus activism has been an important way for students to develop their repertoire for civic engagement.\[113\] There is a parallel experience here with the American University in Cairo (AUC). Though the AUC president at the time, Lisa Anderson, discouraged students from breaking the law to participate in nationwide protests, maintaining a facilitative climate on campus created a tradition of protest such that students “turned their attention from national politics to rallying against the university’s [policies].”\[114\]

Importantly, on-campus action often prefigures future off-campus activism. For instance, Yale-NUS alumnus Tee Zhuo credited his involvement in formulating sexual misconduct policies for the college for showing him “the need for activism in seeking justice and holding people to account.”\[115\] As a national newspaper reporter today, he has helped bring attention to youth activism over climate change and LGBT rights in Singapore through his writings.\[116\] Yale-NUS students and alumni have pursued vocal and visible change-making beyond campus, writing open letters critical of government officials,\[117\] organizing the first ever Singapore Climate Rally in response to the Fridays for Future protests,\[118\] writing and speaking publicly about LGBTQ+ rights,\[119\] engaging in art-ivism promoting children’s and women’s rights,\[120\] openly criticizing entrenched racism, the death penalty, and other forms of inequality and injustice,\[121\] and organizing events on pressing issues confronting Singapore.\[122\]

Many of our students have pursued an approach that Dr. Lynette Chua, NUS legal scholar and Residential College Rector at Yale-NUS College describes as “pragmatic resistance,” in which “activists adjust their tactics according to changes in formal law and cultural norms and push the limits of those norms while simultaneously adhering to them.”\[123\] For instance, the student group Fossil Free YNC, Singapore’s first student fossil fuel divestment movement, learned to adapt its strategy to suit the local context. The group recognized that “while protests, marches or sit-ins are okay in other countries, the available tactics [in Singapore] are more limited—like writing an opinion piece for [newspapers] or asking for meetings with university administrators.”\[124\] Even so, they have been pushing the political envelope, creating notable milestones on the national activist stage. For instance, in the lead up to the 2020 general election, Yale-NUS students played a part in launching the country’s first “climate scorecard” that ranked political parties based on their plans on addressing climate change.\[125\]

At the 2019 graduation, President Tan made clear that civic engagement continues to be a value which the institution proudly celebrates. He exhorted “You are, after all, not only critical but compassionate thinkers—eager to make a meaningful impact on the world around you, and to use what you have been given to change things for the better.”\[126\] Indeed, the experiences and anecdotal reflections of both current and former Yale-NUS College students have often corroborated this achievement. They have attributed their ongoing involvement in various civic engagement projects to a curriculum that, as one student describes, cultivated “the cultural, aesthetic, and rhetorical awareness needed for students to become sensitive and compassionate readers of human experience.”\[127\] These projects have ranged from educational initiatives to teach photography to migrant
communities in Latin America, using dance lessons to help young female refugees in Lebanon share their stories, and financial literacy campaigns for Nepali women entrepreneurs. This list speaks to the importance of maintaining context-sensitivity without jeopardizing institutional fidelity to the liberal arts. Purinton and Skaggs note that leadership in the liberal arts requires sending frequent “reminders about their institutions’ aims, mission, and methods to faculty, staff, students, parents, employers, and host governments” because their statements and discursive commitments can contribute significantly to having a facilitative campus climate for civic learning. In section III of this volume we present further and more systematic research, which empirically assesses the extent to which these aims have actually been achieved for Yale-NUS students.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued for a context-sensitive approach to civic engagement education, which can help educators teach in a way that cultivates rather than alienates student engagement. Attention to context can empower educators to curate culturally relevant civic engagement education, translating universal vocabularies into locally resonant ideas and praxis. After all, we should not simply be concerned with what and how we teach but also with the meta-concerns over how we can create space to deliver what we envision as part of the civic engagement curriculum in a variety of local contexts.

Rather than dismiss possibilities for civic engagement in a less liberal context, we have found that there are significant forms of civic engagement, though these forms might differ in style and substance from those seen in more liberal polities. For example, community service, inquiry, and deliberation may be emphasized more strongly than overt political mobilization, protest, and confrontational modes of advocacy. Action might be directed at college-level policies rather than national ones. The college serves as an important enclave or mesoclimate for fostering facilitative classrooms, residential spaces, student associations, and other microclimates that encourage student learning about issues, experimentation with repertoire, and networking.

To be sure, paralleling the natural world, macro-climactic political conditions powerfully shape how student civic engagement may be perceived and practiced on the ground, on and off campus. Through firm commitment among institutional leaders, campus climate can be maintained such that there is a buffer against external political pressures. Meso- and micro-climactic conditions, the campus climate, and its constituent free spaces, on the other hand, are equally key to ensuring a vibrant and actively engaged student community.

**Endnotes**


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10. Thomas and Brower, “Conceptualizing and Assessing Campus Climates”.


15. Purinton and Skaggs, “Leadership for the Liberal Arts”.


18. The American Freshman Survey for example has found that 9% of freshmen plan to participate in protests while in college, and along with other survey findings led researchers to conclude that civic engagement among American college students was at its highest levels in the last 50 years. Jake New, “Get Ready for More Protests” *Inside Higher Ed*, (11 February 2016), https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/02/11/survey-finds-nearly-1-in-10-freshmen-plan-participating-campus-protests. See also: Adrienne Greer, “The Re-Politicization of America’s Colleges” *The Atlantic*, (12 February 2016), https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/freshman-survey/462429/. Various “Student Living” online publications continue to include “join a protest” in the university bucket list. For examples, see https://www.studentliving.sodexo.com/student-living/blog/article/3x_news/pi3%5Bnews%5D=8&q&cHash=6e49d9060b18c2c71a4d9c8f7740ac6e3 and https://www.savethestudent.org/freshers/university-bucket-list-16-things-every-student-must-do.html. Reportedly, one in five Americans had taken part in a protest since the beginning of the Trump administration. Commentators have called 2020 the year of student protest, during which college students participated in the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the movement to tear down Confederate symbols in universities. See Michael T. Nietzel, “Five Reasons 2020 will be the Year of the Student Protest,” *Forbes*, (10 July 2020), https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltmietzel/2020/07/10/five-reasons-2020-is-the-year-of-the-student-protest/?sh=13006c373c.


25. Chua Beng Huat argues that Singapore’s state ideology is communitarian, captured in the mantra of “society above individual” that is anti-liberal. This ideological emphasis on the “collective” has been entrenched, for example, in its public housing and ethnic relations policies. See Beng Huat Chua, *Liberalism Disavored: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017) on communitarian and liberal approaches to governance in Singapore. However, Daniel Bell has challenged the individualism-communitarianism juxtaposition that is often used in Singaporean discourse to encourage people to privilege collective goods over minority or individual wants. See Daniel A. Bell, “A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism,” *Society* 32, no. 5 (1995): 38–43. While we are not arguing that there are distinctly collectivist or “Asian values” that must be observed in less liberal and/or Asian contexts, we have found as educators that many—though not all—students perceive/believe that there are such distinct values. Some students can find the individualistic approach of liberal “make your voice heard” modes of political engagement to be alienating, even a form of cultural neo-imperialism. Provocation can be an excellent teaching tool when it sparks creativity and new knowledge. At the same time, inclusivity and sensitivity to local context is valuable for gaining students’ trust, which is a precondition to impactful teaching. Students from less liberal contexts may be more engaged by educational models that take seriously the impact of individual action on the community, and acknowledgement if not deference to community norms and customs.


40. Purinton and Skaggs, American Universities Abroad.
41. Harward and Shea, “Higher Education”.
45. Tan, “Service Learning Outside the US.”
57. Sim, Chua and Krishnasamy, “‘Riding the Citizenship Wagon’,” 100.
58. Lim, Tan and Saito, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.”
60. Hansson and Weiss, Political Participation in Asia, 6.


63. Leyl, “Singapore Election”.


74. The broadcast media is controlled by MediaCorp which is owned by sovereign wealth fund, Temasek Holdings. Singapore law; correspondingly, it deploys law to delegitimize dissenting voices through prosecutions and legal sanctions.” See Lysette Chua, Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 78–79; Correspondingly, use of the law by the state in Singapore for the purpose of stifling dissent and quelling political protest, as well as the recent proposed media reforms by the Singapore government, are discussed in Cherian George, Remaking an Untenable Media System: Why SPH’s Proposed Overhaul is Not Enough, Academia SG, (7 May 2021), https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/media-system.


76. Reporters Without Borders, “Singapore: An Alternative Way to Curtail Press Freedom,” Reporters Without Borders, (2021), https://rsf.org/en/singapore. As legal scholar Lynette Chua writes, “The Singaporean state has no tradition of tolerating open confrontation and protest and uses the law to suppress such actions and cultivate cultural reticence. The rule of law prevails in the Singaporean state, but it takes a specific form. At the helm of the state is the People’s Action Party... this same type of rule of law, one of a rule-bound character, is also simultaneously harnessed to quell political differences and engineer social order. The state legitimizes the curtailment of constitutionally guaranteed civil-political liberties, such as speech, assembly, and association, by legislating the restrictions in accordance with existing law; correspondingly, it deploys law to delegitimize dissenting voices through prosecutions and legal sanctions.” See Lynette J. Chua, Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 78–79; Correspondingly, use of the law by the state in Singapore for the purpose of stifling dissent and quelling political protest, as well as the recent proposed media reforms by the Singapore government, are discussed in Cherian George, Remaking an Untenable Media System: Why SPH’s Proposed Overhaul is Not Enough, Academia SG, (7 May 2021), https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/media-system.

73. Under the Act, an “assembly” means a gathering or meeting (whether or not comprising any lecture, talk, address, debate or discussion) of persons the purpose (or one of the purposes) of which is—(a) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person, group of persons or any government; (b) to publicise a cause or campaign; or (c) to mark or commemorate any event, and includes a demonstration by a person alone for any such purpose referred to in paragraph (a), (b) or (c).” For a full description, it is available at https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/POA2009.

74. For example, in February 2021, in the wake of the military coup in Myanmar, the Singapore Police Force released this advisory: “The Police would like to remind the public that organising or participating in a public assembly without a Police permit in Singapore is illegal and constitutes an offence under the Public Order Act. Foreigners visiting, working or living in Singapore are also reminded to abide by our laws. They should not import the politics of their own countries into Singapore. Those who break the law will be dealt with firmly, and this may include termination of visas or work passes.” This is available at https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20210205_police_advisory_police_warn_against_holding_protests_in_relation_to_recent_dev_in_myanmar. As will be discussed in chapter 13, the exclusion of foreigners from certain political activities becomes a significant factor for civic engagement education in a multinational college context.


87. Under the Act, an “assembly” means a gathering or meeting (whether or not comprising any lecture, talk, address, debate or discussion) of persons the purpose (or one of the purposes) of which is—(a) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person, group of persons or any government; (b) to publicise a cause or campaign; or (c) to mark or commemorate any event, and includes a demonstration by a person alone for any such purpose referred to in paragraph (a), (b) or (c).” For a full description, it is available at https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/POA2009.


94. Taken from the Yale-NUS College Student Handbook (2013), 71.

95. Emphasis in original.

96. Available at Yale-NUS College official website at https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/about/policies-and-procedures.


100. CEUS, Report of the Committee, 4, 41.

101. The College vision statement reads “A community of learning/ founded by two great universities/ In Asia, for the world.” This last stanza speaks to ambitious goals for students, graduates, and staff to shape the world around them. According to the 2014 Yale-NUS College Faculty Handbook, the mission statement elaborates, “We educate citizens of the world and uphold the principles of free exchange of ideas, pluralism, and respect for diversity. Our extra-curricular and residential programs support student learning and encourage an ethic of service.”


105. With few exceptions, small liberal arts institutions in the United States have international student populations less than 20%. In terms of our student body, we have more in common with other new hybrid or partnership universities outside the US, such as Duke Kunshan (30% international) and NYU-Shanghai (50% international).


108. Tan, “Thinking Critically.”


113. See chapter 13 for details on this.

114. Lisa Anderson, “… To Save Us All!: Lessons from the American University in Cairo, a Community of Learning in Revolutionary Times,” in Purinton and Skaggs, eds. American Universities Abroad, 37.

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122. See, for example, the information dossiers and events hosted by the student organization Community for Advocacy and Political Education (https://cape.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg) and the student sexuality and gender collective named G-Spot.

123. Chua, Mobilizing Gay Singapore, 74.

124. Tee, “Millennial Activism: Student Group”.


