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

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By design, Yuanpei College doesn't have its own professors, a decision that still sometimes puts it in tension with the broader faculty at PKU, some of whom see Yuanpei students as lacking in commitment to a discipline and competing for limited resources with the students inside their own departments.

"This gave us a lot of challenges in the beginning because students and professors from other departments didn't want students from Yuanpei," Professor Sun said.

Since then, the students' performance in their classes has helped shift the dial, convincing reluctant professors "that a student not picking any major in beginning and

business because it was their parents' decision. Students study that major but don't like it," he said. "If Yuanpei students choose a major, they choose it by their own will...in Yuanpei, you truly love that major."

pick a department and simply follow the curriculum, Yuanpei students must select their own courses – something most struggle to do.

"Students in Yuanpei are really good, passionate, ambitious [and] know what they're doing, but some come to Yuanpei just because their studies were good in high school, not because they know what they want to pursue in university," Professor Sun said.

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today, Professor Sun said.

Recently, the school has shifted its focus to creating an environment in which students learn outside the classroom. Taken for granted in countries with long-established liberal arts traditions, the emphasis on socialising is still foreign in China, with students expected to buckle down and study during their university years – something that Yuanpei's recently launched curriculum change seeks to address.

"We wanted to put students together to give them a public space so they could hang out, talk to each other, develop their many hobbies. We want to explore a style of university