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# Advocate residential colleges for China

Over the last decade, there has been a rapid growth in higher education in China. For instance, the annual budget for some top universities in China reached an eye-popping \$1.5 billion in 2012. However, there are also heated debates as to what extent such huge investment in hardware and research funding really adds in educational value to undergraduate students. There are disputes and tensions among stakeholders of some universities over whether a modern administration tower or a golf course should be built for a small group of users, or should such money be used to enhance undergraduates' learning outcomes.

A major crisis in undergraduate education is ongoing at many universities around the world, particularly at research-led universities in which competition for scale, resources, research outputs and rankings are being over-emphasized. As a result of this focus, universities are becoming increasingly utilitarian. They tend to overlook the importance of developing students' abilities to think independently and communicate effectively, and do not care much about cultivating humanist values or a sense of social responsibility. The teachers at these universities tend to be detached and alienated from their students, and they care little about their students' lives outside the classroom. The students are thus unable to relate what they learn in class to their lives outside the classroom.

Liberal arts education is one of the most potent remedies for these problems. Besides the better-

understood "general education" as a vehicle for liberal education, the residential college system has proven another effective measure for reforming today's undergraduate education.

Residential colleges have existed for a long time, as one can find a similar but primitive mode in China during the Tang Dynasty. Today they are found at old prestigious universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and Yale, for example.

A residential college is intended to form a small community on campus, in which teachers and students mingle outside classrooms. It is a place where students integrate their studies and their lives into a coherent whole. In this communal setting, faculty members carry out their traditional role of delivering holistic education and giving pastoral care to the students. Students have dual identities: they belong to both an academic unit and a residential college. These identities are complementary.

Each college is usually limited to about 400 student residents, accounting for at least three-quarters of the total population. The remainder are faculty members (serving as college fellows) and postgraduate students (serving as resident tutors). Students from different years of study, majors, nationalities and family backgrounds are mixed together. When accommodation is insufficient, some students may be allowed to become non-residential members with exclusive common areas set aside for them.

Students and teachers in residential colleges tend to have a strong sense of participation in their col-

lege's unique culture, style, and features and develop an affinity for it. This provides students with plenty of opportunities to express their creativity. As members of this learning-living community, they interact with one another on an active ongoing basis. Through this self-managed learning process, they build character, interpersonal communication skills, group skills and leadership skills.

To promote liberal education and revive the teacher's traditional role of providing students with pastoral care and nurturing them by example, it is suggested that major universities in China should consider gradually turning their student dormitories into residential colleges. However, universities may find themselves hamstrung by a lack of space or operating funding. A full scale transition to the college system may be a challenging undertaking, but a gradual or partial approach would be more feasible in the short-run. For such important student learning initiatives, it may be easier to solicit external funding supports than traditional academic and research programs.

As a first step, universities could convert some of their student dormitories into residential colleges. They could only require their new freshmen to live in the colleges first. Residential colleges have the proven ability to encourage the aspirations of young people, deepen their thinking, and change their way of life.

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