

Liberal Arts Education at Lingnan University, Hong Kong: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Lingnan University (LU) in Hong Kong provides whole-person education combining the best of Chinese and Western liberal arts traditions. LU recently enhanced its liberal arts education by developing critical skills and attitudes required for long-term success in the rapidly changing world (e.g., critical thinking, entrepreneurship, innovation, and leadership), refocusing the balance between disciplinary/vocational training and whole-person development, establishing new programs that meet student and societal needs, encouraging high-impact pedagogies, and expanding residential education. Assessments of student and employer satisfaction indicate appreciation for LU's liberal arts approach. Other universities in China are likely to face similar opportunities and challenges, so LU's experiences can provide a roadmap for success and evidence of the ultimate value of liberal arts education.

Keywords: liberal arts education, general education, whole-personal development, higher education, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Liberal arts education combines in-depth study with broad education to achieve goals such as knowledge of human culture and the natural world, intellectual and practical skills, and personal and social responsibility intended to prepare graduates to deal with “complexity, diversity, and change” (Association of American College and Universities, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). The form of liberal arts education can be exemplified by the small liberal arts colleges in the United States which are typically residential, focused primarily on undergraduates, and characterized by active student engagement through small classes using active learning pedagogies with frequent student-faculty interaction (Brighouse, 2019; Ferrall, 2011; Hirsch, 1999). Although the demise of liberal arts education has been predicted (Altshuler, 2015; Dutt-Ballerstad, 2019; Jones, 2016; Rosenberg, 2020), others claim that modified versions of liberal arts education represent the future of higher education (Altshuler, 2015; Jones, 2016; Dutt-Ballerstad, 2019; Rosenberg, 2020; Hirsch, 1999; Ferrall, 2011; Brighouse, 2019; Mintz, 2020; Moner et al., 2020).

Lingnan University (LU), located in Tuen Mun, Hong Kong, identifies itself

as “the liberal arts university in Hong Kong” (Lingnan University, 2021a) and was recognized as one of the “Top 10 Liberal Arts College in Asia” by Forbes (2015). In this paper, we will examine the history of the establishment of Lingnan University as a liberal arts university in Hong Kong, explore the current “liberal arts” practices at the university, and finally discuss strategies for addressing current and future challenges facing liberal arts education at Lingnan University, in China, and elsewhere in the world.

Brief History of Lingnan University

The early history of the university that was originally founded in Guangzhou in 1888 (Lingnan University, 2020b) and has operated under a number of names (Christian College in China, Canton Christian College, Lingnan College, Lingnan University) has been reviewed by Wang (2007). Lingnan was unique among other Christian colleges in China at that time because it was chartered by the Regents of the State of New York and managed by a board of trustees, making Lingnan independent of any single religious group (Cheng, 2009) which allowed more independence, but increased the challenge of financing.