

(Translation)  
**Reforming Undergraduate Education through Residential Colleges**  
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Following the significant increase of investment and college entrance rate, major countries and regions in Asia are now seeking to develop world-class universities. This, as remarked by President of Yale University Prof. Richard Levin in London in early February this year, is a strategic and painstaking task (Please refer to [www.yalechina.org/home.php?id=17](http://www.yalechina.org/home.php?id=17)). In this regard, we should, above all, have a deeper understanding of what “world-class university” means, rather than just ideals or slogans about it.

According to the author’s observation and experience, apart from renowned scholars, buildings, funds, academic freedom, an independent governing system and outstanding research outcomes, more importantly, a world-class university has to focus on students and their cultivation. We should ensure that our students are equipped with not only specialized knowledge and research skills, but also the capacity to solve problems, to innovate and to lead, from a cross-disciplinary perspective.

The difficulties and challenges facing undergraduate education nowadays have resulted not only from narrowly-designed programmes and monotonous teaching methodologies, but also from the isolation between students and professors outside the classroom, the insufficiency of extracurricular activities and the lack of effort to cultivate the above-mentioned skills and capacities.

During a long period in the past, many universities saw rapid expansions, and professors were busy with their research and publications. Amidst this trend, undergraduate teaching was gradually neglected, and care and tutoring for students loosened. Some people even held that on-campus dormitories and some after-class group activities could solve all the problems, thus engaging in an erroneous practice of “research university” based on a misunderstanding of the same. Obviously, as a result, many students have encountered difficulties not only in their studies but also in their personal development. These problems include their narrow perspectives about life and the world, lack of reasoning and communication skills, weak capacity of independent thinking and little progress in their skills of inter-personal relations.

Due to the hike of student population in some universities, classroom teaching has largely become an “infusion of knowledge” into sizable groups of students, and learning a passive mechanical process. Professors rarely know their students, and the contact has become increasingly scarce between students and professors. How to combine classroom learning with extracurricular life of students, how to let professors resume their genuine care for students and make a difference in their life, and how to return to the goal of cultivating “whole persons”? These are the major concerns behind the reform of undergraduate education in many universities.

In order to enhance students’ learning and life on campus, apart from strengthening general education at undergraduate level and adopting more flexible and interactive teaching methods, another effective way is to resume our attention to the traditional role of professors in cultivating students.

In fact, universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, which have 800 years of history, have been upholding this philosophy, particularly through a system called “Residential College (RC)”. Regrettably, this concept has been rarely addressed by Prof. Richard Levin in his speeches. This is one of the reasons that have prompted the author to further explore this topic.

The other old Ivy League universities such as Harvard and Yale and some small liberal arts colleges in the US adopted the RC system long time ago. The Chinese University of Hong Kong, which was founded in 1963 as three independent colleges, gradually developed a non-fully residential college system and recently established five new smaller fully or semi-residential colleges.

Unfortunately, this model was not given attention by other universities in the past 50 years. It was not until some ten years ago that higher education system was reviewed and reformed in North America with a boom of residential colleges in some major universities there. What we are witnessing now seems a return to the original and genuine nature of higher education.

In recent years, a good number of universities have converted part or all of their student dormitories into residential colleges, including those in North America, namely Universities of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Cornell, Virginia, Rice, Murray State, Middlebury College, Claremont McKenna College in the US, and University of Toronto in Canada.

In Asia, several universities have also introduced RC for the first time, such as Yonsei University in Korea, Tunghai University, National Chengchi University and National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, Fundan University in Mainland China and the University of Macau where the author works. Besides, such other universities as Peking University and National University of Singapore have established non-major-based liberal arts colleges as the first step to RC. This shows that the RC system can be implemented not only in resourceful and top universities but also in grass-root public universities, and that this system does not require either additional funding nor will affect the existing academic disciplines.

### Concept and Functions of RC

RC is a small staff-student community on campus that integrates students’ learning and life and that aims to promote their whole-person development. Each student not only belongs to his/her major but also is assigned to one of the residential colleges. In a university, faculties and residential colleges are supplementary to each other.

Normally students will not change their residential colleges during their four years of study. Each RC consists of 200 to 500 members, two third of whom are undergraduate students (including international exchange students), and the rest are staff members and postgraduate students (staff members are usually resident tutors). Student members are from different years of study, majors, nationalities, family social classes and personal backgrounds. In the event of insufficient bed space, some students will become non-resident members and form their own associations.

Various life, learning and recreational facilities are comfortably distributed in the semi-closed space of a residential college. These facilities include student dormitories, quarters for college directors, student advisors and some professors, dining halls, classrooms, study rooms, consultation rooms, small libraries, computer rooms, recreational amenities, performance rehearsal area, gathering area, offices for RC students' associations and courtyards. Students and staff are expected to create a learning and life environment like a small liberal arts college on the big campus, thus broadening their visions and imagination.

A RC is an independent and cross-disciplinary community where students and staff will dine together and communicate frequently. The college affair office and students' associations will regularly organize various kinds of academic, social and recreational activities and provide students with part-time job opportunities in the RC. Therefore, a RC is also an ideal venue to develop mutual consideration, to deliver non-formal education and to stimulate students' moral standard and academic performance. As to the support for learning, the RC can invite its professors to provide the students with tutoring, such as campus life orientation and reading and writing training programmes for fresh students, which are supplementary to the students' credit-bearing courses.

Students and staff will have a strong sense of belonging towards their respective college. Each RC is featured by its own culture, personality and characters, offering plenty of room for students and staff to bring their imaginative talent into play. Communication and interaction will constantly take place between members of this community. In the process of learning self-management, students will also refine their characters and interpersonal skills and enhance their team spirit and leadership capacity.

In the RC, staff and students are respectively senior and young members of a family, where both of them enjoy equal status. RC is the best way to realize the ideal of "academic community". Through activities in this community, students will form life-long friendship and closer personal networks.

This system is substantially different from the student dormitory. The latter is embedded in a structure where teaching and student life are segregated. It offers very few educational functions apart from accommodation. On the contrary, RC is based on the concept of a highly integrated academic community, incorporating classroom learning, residence, extracurricular activities and non-formal education for students.

The core steps in building world class universities take place, the author believes, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the RC will become a major stream in these universities. If any university aspires to become one of such universities, it will have to undertake reforms in teaching staff, research, and governing system, but more importantly, it should pay special attention to the core issues of undergraduate education and the residential college system. In the ultimate analysis, the success of a university is judged primarily by its undergraduate education.

The University of Macau, to which the author is affiliated, is actively undertaking undergraduate curriculum reform. In addition to the university-wide general education programme, and creation of the Honours College and the Centre for Teaching and Learning Enhancement, we are also committed to the establishment of residential

colleges on the new campus. Our goal is to offer elite undergraduate education and produce outstanding graduates with leadership skills and social responsibility.

On 20<sup>th</sup> December 2009, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Macao Special Administrative Region, President of China Mr. Hu Jintao presided over the groundbreaking ceremony of the University of Macau's new campus on Hengqin Island. He recognized the University's effort in these areas and encouraged the University of Macau to strive to become a world class university. The relocation to Hengqin is scheduled to take place in 3 years' time. The new campus will be much more spacious and beautiful, and will feature a highlight of approximately ten specially designed residential colleges. Each of them can provide approximately 500 bed spaces, and therefore most of the undergraduate students can be offered full-residence on campus.

In the year to come, we will launch a trial programme of RC in the current student dormitories (East Asia Hall). Under this programme, entitled "House Life in Brilliance", two houses similar to RC will be established. In this way, it is hoped to let students and staff understand and adapt better to the new RC system and to gradually introduce it to replace the model of dormitories, thus preparing for the full-implementation of RC system on the new campus in three years.

As the residential colleges in other regions have their own merits and limitations, obviously, it is unrealistic for us to apply their experience indiscriminately. Furthermore, because of the traditional culture, family and financial conditions, local students have been lukewarm about on-campus dormitory life, which poses some challenges for the implementation of the RC system in the University of Macau. Despite all these factors, the University will endeavour to improve the residential conditions and culture on campus and learn from other renowned universities worldwide, with a view to establish a RC model that is the most adequate to the local conditions.