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## Cheers to a liberal arts education

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WITH her A-level results, Raffles Junior College student Nazish Zafar could have easily attended any big-name American university.

But she surprised friends and family by choosing Carleton College in Minnesota.

The liberal arts college is consistently ranked among the top five in the United States, but is not a familiar name here.

'Why is it called a college, not a university?' some asked her.

But Ms Zafar, 24, who graduated last year with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in sociology and anthropology, is glad she stuck with her choice.

A generous four-year scholarship from Carleton was a reason she went there, but she was also sold on the broad-based curriculum and intimate learning environment promised by the college.

And Carleton did not disappoint.

Her courses ranged from Russian language, culture and society to Middle Eastern social theory, and women and the Islamic construction of gender. She did courses in computer science, qualitative thinking, statistics, and video production and editing.

It all added up to a grounding in varied disciplines and taught her to see issues from various perspectives.

Her invigorating undergraduate experience is what liberal arts colleges are known for, and Singapore will be offering the same brand of education through a liberal arts college of its own.

She says she liked the fact that her courses traversed two or three discipline areas, showing students the connections across different areas of knowledge.

For example, National Identity In Israeli And Palestinian Literature - a course she did in her first year - meant reading novels and poetry, watching documentaries, and analysing articles expressing views from both sides of the conflict.

'It gave me a refreshingly nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding to the region,' she recalls.

In Year 2, she visited Moscow for three months, living with a Russian family. Her Russian language skills improved by leaps and bounds.

She added two months to that trip to be a volunteer at a community of foster families caring for orphans.

In her final year last year, she and a college mate won a \$10US,000 (\$13S,600) grant to launch a health education project in Fortaleza, Brazil.

Their Napkin Project aimed to educate women on the benefits of breastfeeding through messages printed on napkins handed out by street vendors.

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Ms Zafar, who hopes to work in the social-humanitarian field, says the six-month stint gave her valuable on-the-ground experience.

After a stint as a relief teacher in a primary school here, she is now working at the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports before starting her doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Singapore wants a liberal arts college too, but it will not be an independent private institution as in the United States.

The committee studying the expansion of university places here is concerned that the low teacher-student ratios and extensive interaction between faculty and students and among students can drive up tuition fees, to as high as \$43US,000 a year.

It feels that Singapore students and parents unfamiliar with the benefits may not be willing to pay so much.

Hence the suggestion for a liberal arts college set up as an affiliate of a larger university, to leverage on the resources of its parent institution and keep fees affordable.

Liberal arts graduates Tan Shin Bin, 24, and Alexander Lim, 26, say whatever the form, Singapore could do with a liberal arts college.

Ms Tan, a former Hwa Chong Junior College student, went to Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where almost all classes were discussions or seminars attended by between three and 15 students.

'Because there were so few of us in a class, you are forced to participate. My education in Wellesley taught me to speak up and take a stand on issues,' says Ms Tan, who now works for a statutory board.

Mr Lim, who went to Carleton, says: 'You are constantly challenged on your beliefs and assumptions by your professors as well as classmates.'

Taken aback initially, he soon learnt to deliver intellectual punch for punch.

He feels there is a need to educate parents, students and employers here on the benefits of a liberal arts education.

The former Anglo-Chinese Junior College student says he gets quizzed about liberal arts colleges at interviews.

'Very different from the US where it is a big deal to be a graduate of a liberal arts college as they are super selective,' he says.

American liberal arts colleges have a history going back to the 1800s. The education they espouse has been questioned, with more Americans opting for a more career-relevant education.

But, by any measure, the liberal arts colleges have been a success story.

The last comprehensive study done on graduates of liberal arts colleges was 10 years ago but the findings still hold true.

It found that only 3 per cent of American college graduates attended residential liberal arts colleges, but their alumni accounted for 8 per cent of Forbes magazine's listing of the nation's wealthiest CEOs, 23 per cent of Pulitzer Prize winners in drama, 19 per cent of the winners in history, 18 per cent in poetry, 8 per cent in biography, and 6 per cent in fiction from 1960 to 1998.

They were also over-represented among recipients of prestigious scholarships.

Famous alumni include former president Woodrow Wilson, author Dan Brown, former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, news anchor Diane Sawyer, actress Meryl Streep and Senator Hillary Clinton.

And should Mrs Clinton become the next US president, she will boost the tally of 19 per cent of US presidents with a liberal arts education.

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NO REGRETS

Ms Nazish Zafar's courses at Carleton College included:

YEAR 1

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Russian Culture And Society

Elementary Russian

Women And The Islamic Construction Of Gender

YEAR 2

Biology Of Conservation

Introduction To Video Production

Middle Eastern Social Theory

YEAR 3

Introduction To Statistics

Sociological Thought & Theory

Art Of Oral Presentation

Qualitative Thinking

YEAR 4

Orphanages: A Cross Cultural Studies Analysis

Elementary Chinese

Class, Power And Inequality In America

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