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Yale-NUS College as Embassy and Students as Ambassadors: International Student Attraction and Engagement Strategies

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ABSTRACT: *As Yale-NUS College came to its close in 2025, it represents a unique case study for examining the factors that attracted students from all over the world to Yale-NUS. Drawing upon the extant literature on internationalization-at-home and international student mobilities, as well as mixed-methods interviews with key faculty and staff and a survey of students and alumni, this paper identifies an "ambassadorial spirit" in students whereby they strongly identify with and act as representatives of the College to improve brand reputation in Singapore and abroad. This ambassadorial spirit is formed through the selection of particular traits in the admissions process, the common experiences that bond students, and students' interaction with the institution of Yale-NUS College. Altogether, this case study aims to distill the Yale-NUS experience into lessons for higher education institutions aiming to generate a strong community identity and sense of belonging.*

Keywords: ambassadorial spirit, cross-border higher education, international branch campus, internationalization, internationalization-at-home, international student mobility, sense of belonging

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INTRODUCTION

As of 2025, Yale-NUS College has graduated from only nine cohorts of students. Less than 2000 people can say that they are an alumnus of Yale-NUS. However, in less than a decade, Yale-NUS has already built an esteemed reputation as an elite liberal arts college, the first of its kind in Singapore and in Southeast Asia. Its network spans the globe, and Yale-NUS alumni have started to leave their mark in postgraduate studies by earning esteemed awards and having fruitful careers.

However, despite all of Yale-NUS College's acclaimed successes, the merger and eventual closure of Yale-NUS College was announced on 28 August 2021. Compared to other cases of international branch campuses (IBCs) and small liberal arts colleges (LACs) facing closure due to lack of funding or low enrollment (Lawton and Katsomitros, 2012, pp. 80-81), Yale-NUS did not suffer from these conditions; notably, Singapore's Minister of Education stated that cost was not the main reason (Ng, 2021, para. 4). In contrast, Yale-NUS College maintained a high volume of applications and selective (5.2% overall) admissions processes. As such, Yale-NUS College represents a unique case study for studying the expectations that its admissions marketing generated among potential students, the experiences that are significant to students and alumni, and the acclaimed successes widely perceived by students, staff, faculty, and onlookers alike. This case study is designed to distill the Yale-NUS experience into valuable lessons for other higher education institutions aiming to generate a strong community identity and student buy-in.

Given that Yale-NUS College is fully residential for all four years of the undergraduate degree program, it resembles Goffman's depiction of "total institution", where students and some staff live, work, play, and sleep in a "social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organization" (Davies, 1989, p. 77). Many scholars have also examined universities as contested sites for "production of knowledge, student identities, and everyday forms of embodied politics" (Cheng, 2018, p. 618). In particular, international branch campuses (IBCs) face critical tensions between internationalization and adapting to their local contexts and the complex ways in which everyday policies, practices, and programs of IBCs shape the mobility and immobility of students. IBCs and liberal arts colleges in Southeast Asia are relatively new and few, and so is the research about them. In addition to studying Yale-NUS as a unique case study in the region, I extend Lane's (2016) concept of IBCs as "embassies of knowledge" by envisioning students' role as ambassadors of the institution (p. 354). Finally, students' perspectives have been studied to a limited extent (Kang, 2019; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014; Ahmad, 2014), so the particular backdrop of an unexpected and high-profile closure announcement makes the Yale-NUS case particularly interesting for examining student and alumni reflections on what attracted them to Yale-NUS initially, as well as the elements of their experience that remain significant today.

BACKGROUND

Singapore is not merely a neutral site for Yale-NUS College; rather, understanding the contextual higher education landscape is necessary for understanding the case study of Yale-NUS. Singapore has long been building its "student hub" in line with its quest to become a prominent international "knowledge hub" and "talent hub" (Sidhu et al., 2013; Weng, 2025, p. 13); Singapore invests in recruiting "high value" human capital (international students) to contribute to innovation (Sidhu et al., 2010, p. 27). Both the conception and closure of Yale-NUS College are nestled within Singapore's long-term aims to build an attractive global city and are part of a broader, long-term strategy of the Singapore government and the National University of Singapore to "invite foreign 'world class universities' to enable [Singapore] to exploit their 'brand equity'" and foster internationalization (Sidhu et al., 2010, p. 26; Siltaoja et al., 2019, pp. 91-92). By 2005, 16 foreign universities had developed schools in Singapore (Chen et al., 2019, p. 1182), with some prominent examples being the IBCs James Cook University, UNLV Singapore, and NYU Tisch School (Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012, pp. 44, 61) and the partnership between MIT and local university SUTD (Fisher, 2020). In this regard, the establishment of Yale-NUS College was a continuation of long running goals at the institutional and national level to construct an education hub, and its closure, evidence of a recalibration of these goals.

Although international branch campuses are far from a new phenomenon, the explosion of IBCs after the turn of the century is widely discussed in higher education research (Paniagua et al., 2022, p. 512; Zhang & Dai, 2024, p. 183) and prompts warnings from critics of the risks and long-term implications that founding institutions may not consider. Altbach (2015) highlights that sustainability should but often is not taken into account when establishing a branch campus (p. 3); some challenges to sustainability include competition with other branch campuses or universities, commitment of professors from the home institution, and the unpredictability of local conditions (Cao, 2011, p. 9). Kent (2022), a former senior admissions counsellor at Yale-NUS College, also observed that the closure of Yale-NUS fit into an ongoing trend of a few IBC closures occurring year after year, which he attributes to "the large proliferation of IBCs, a changing international context, and challenges in administrative and financial management" (p. 24).

Several controversies arose from the initial announcement of Yale-NUS, especially concerns regarding freedom of expression voiced by Yale faculty and other US-based stakeholders (Tan, 2017, p. 4). Pericles Lewis, the first president of Yale-NUS College, and Richard Levin, president of Yale University at the time, responded: "Yale-NUS's policy specifically protects academic freedom for research, teaching, and discussion on campus," while stressing that the College ought to respect Singapore laws and context (Tan, 2017, pp 4-5). In addition, Liu & Lye (2016) prompt us to consider the "friction between the 'liberal' in 'liberal arts' and the 'liberal' in 'neoliberalism'" (p. 579). These tensions are not only

negotiated on senior leadership levels but were also part and parcel of the everyday affairs of Yale-NUS College.

Research Questions

1. What generates the ambassadorial spirit of Yale-NUS students?

This question aims to identify preconditions and factors that cause students to identify as and act as ambassadors of Yale-NUS College. In addition to identifying factors that generate an ambassadorial spirit among Yale-NUS students, I explore whether these factors are unique to Yale-NUS:

2. To what extent is this phenomenon unique to Yale-NUS or replicable elsewhere?

Given that many policies and programs at Yale-NUS are informed by preexisting models found elsewhere, how "unique" is Yale-NUS? Furthermore, regardless of the comparative uniqueness of Yale-NUS, why do students, staff, and faculty of Yale-NUS persistently perceive the institution as set apart from other higher education institutions, especially in Singapore and the region? Addressing these questions is salient for presenting lessons learned from Yale-NUS College's brief but impactful existence as the first liberal arts college in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, studying the transferability of key aspects of the "Yale-NUS experience" can highlight best practices, areas of caution, and how to best manage a transplanted context by balancing internationalization and localization. Next, I situate my research questions within two major strands of extant literature: internationalization-at-home and international student mobilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization and internationalization-at-home (IaH)

The idea of internationalization-at-home emerged in late 1990s Europe in conjunction with notions of equity and access due to concerns that the internationalization of higher education was not inclusive of most immobile local students (Almeida et al., 2018, p. 201). Thus, governments and higher education institutions aimed to create policies and programs that increased access to international learning without requiring a student to travel or study abroad. Knight's (2008) review of evolving definitions of internationalization provides a working definition: "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education and the institutional and national levels" (p. xi). IaH practices include designing intentional encounters to cultivate social integration between different student groups, reconstituting "home" and safe spaces, internationalization of the curriculum emphasizing the value of global learning and connecting local and international experiences to academic learning, and on the organizational level, creating opportunities for interdisciplinary discussions valuing different perspectives (Agnew & Kahn, 2014, pp. 32-35). Some drivers of IaH in Singapore include the historical legacy of the multiracial society, its outward-oriented

economic policies, the constantly changing of the education system, and the policy of bilingualism with mandatory mother tongue education (Daquila, 2013, p. 631; Weng, 2025, pp. 13-14). Other Asian states associate internationalization policies with the potential for augmenting global competitiveness and leadership, as well as regional cooperation, and states have different forms of higher education programs in pursuit of internationalization (Zhang, 2021, pp. 12-13).

International branch campuses are engaged in a precarious balancing act between internationalization and appropriately adapting to their local context. The ability of IBCs to effectively localize is an ethical concern and a determinant of their long-term success; failure to do so can have adverse effects on the lifespan of IBCs (Altbach, 2015, p. 3; Wilkins, 2015, pp. 1389-1390). In autocratic states where the government has many regulations to grapple with, institutions must consider whether their operation and compliance with local regulations, perhaps on academic freedom and civil liberties, equates to support for the regime (Wilkins, 2015, p. 1391; Koch & Vora, 2019, p. 551).

On the other hand, a significant critique applicable to both Yale-NUS College and IBCs more broadly is that they risk incorporating internationalization as simply Westernization or neo-imperialism, importing an American model of liberal arts education (Sperduti, 2019, p. 9). This warning must be taken seriously: despite a recent increase in universities from non-Western countries creating their own branch campuses elsewhere, most IBCs are still established by institutions based in the US or UK (Wilkins, 2021, p. 312). Furthermore, IBCs often promote the spread of Western pedagogy, use English as a medium of instruction, and extend scholarly publishing trends by pressuring faculty to publish in English academic journals (Sperduti, 2019, pp. 9-10). Amidst the controversy around the founding of Yale-NUS College, the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong asserted that "It is not a replica of Yale, but a bold effort to create something new and different" through redefining liberal arts education and incorporating "diverse intellectual traditions and cultures of Asia and the world" (Tan, 2017, p. 3). The extent to which Yale-NUS-as-embassy was successful in breeding a new conception of liberal arts beyond Western pedagogical superiority is inconclusive, and future studies may benefit in examining the successes and failures of Yale-NUS College in greater detail from different stakeholder perspectives. However, the discussion of student-as-ambassadors at Yale-NUS must be situated within the national goals of internationalization.

International student mobilities (ISMs)

Finally, IBCs often attract diverse students. International students have unique characteristics that distinguish them from other types of migrants: they migrate with a clear purpose, face different push-pull factors, are in "a crucial period of identity formation," and are highly mobile – even though moving overseas for university is likely a new experience for many students, they are prone to "use the host country as a stepping stone" and move elsewhere after graduation (Ge & Ho, 2014, pp. 201-203). Both international student mobility and transnational education have increased since the turn of the century (Wilkins,

2015, p. 1386). In Asia, emergent markets for higher education have facilitated greater intra-Asia education migration, contrary to historical trends of East–West and South–North migration, and in Singapore, the number of inbound students has exceeded that of outbound students (Ge & Ho, 2014, p. 200). In migration and mobility studies, the literature on international student mobilities (ISMs) is especially relevant to the scope of this project. King and Raghuram's (2012) comprehensive map of the field highlights that international students are mired in contradictions between being "'desired' because of their internationalism and fee contributions and as 'unwanted' because of the politics of migration control" (p. 131).

Likewise, Kleibert (2021) has outlined the intersection between transnational education and international student mobilities, arguing that branch campuses are "conceptualized as infrastructures of im/mobilities," embedded in global networks of movement and localized migration regimes of control (p. 92). Yale-NUS College places institutional emphasis on international and experiential learning and traits that students ought to have: "globally oriented, socially responsible" (Cheng, 2018, p.626). Through these experiences, Yale-NUS becomes the site where students negotiate their identities and reconfigure understandings of their personal mobility. Other research suggests that "engaging in a mobile international education" enables students to develop institutional social capital and develops "students' ability to use this form of capital in their specific local context" (Kohler, 2019, p. 127). The acquisition of these skills is invaluable in a globalized world, as these skills are inextricably tied to students' mobility.

Raghuram prompts further investigation into theories of how students and other institutional stakeholders are "implicated (together) in producing knowledge systems and how mobility is necessary to producing such systems" (King & Raghuram, 2012, p. 131). Furthermore, there is also literature studying the mobility of academics with distinctions between short-term fieldwork or networking or long-term relocation to build careers (Gunter & Raghuram 2018, p. 194). The recruitment of international staff and faculty from overseas is one way Yale-NUS is involved in shaping the mobility of staff and faculty as well. Mobility is central to the concept of ambassadorial spirit: Yale-NUS is advertised as education for global citizens, and the mobility of local and international students before, during, and after their Yale-NUS education informs students' avenues for acting as ambassadors for the college.

METHOD

To elucidate the causes and potential replicability of ambassadorial spirit in students, I conducted a case study of Yale-NUS College in Singapore. Yale-NUS was chosen because it is positioned in a unique setting within Singapore and Southeast Asia, whereas many clusters of international branch campuses (IBCs) are located within East Asia and the Middle East (Wilkins, 2021, p. 312). Furthermore, the closure of Yale-NUS College was for relatively unique reasons

as well, but many IBC closures are due to lack of funding and low enrollment – problems that Yale-NUS did not face (Loke, 2022, p. 18).

Survey of Yale-NUS students and alumni

I chose to test my research question via a survey of the student and alumni populations. Surveys are a widely used, effective method of studying complex decision-making surrounding student mobility (Ge & Ho, 2014, p. 204). Studies on potential and current students' subjective perspectives and experiences have been limited, but an emerging body of research examines tertiary students' sense of belonging (Mohamad & Manning, 2023, p. 26; Allen et al., 2024; Ho et al., 2025; Verbree et al., 2025). Some studies explore brand reputation in shaping student decision-making and examine prospective university students' subjective perceptions of IBC service quality (Chee et al., 2016, p. 93; Ahmad, 2014, p. 491). At Yale-NUS, numerous factors apply to prospective student decision-making as well, with affordability, international/experiential learning opportunities, academics, and residential life being the most significant. As such, my survey collected demographic data and responses to open-ended questions about the prior expectations and lived experiences of Yale-NUS students and alumni.

My survey was disseminated via the Yale-NUS Alumni LinkedIn group and other social media sites while also relying on convenience and snowball sampling (Roberts, 2014). Alumni were included as a population of interest for this survey because they remain invested in Yale-NUS and embody the ambassadorial spirit as well, as demonstrated by other studies on alumni loyalty (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Snijders et al., 2019). As a population, they are representative witnesses to the changes at Yale-NUS since 2013, enabling this study to capture changes in the expectations of and experiences at Yale-NUS over time, and the distance may crystallize which experiences remain influential years after graduating. This is in stark contrast to the priorities of current Yale-NUS students at the time of surveying in 2023, who were immersed in the Yale-NUS experience and had a stake in the College's day-to-day affairs. In total, I received 89 responses representing students and alumni across a range of cohorts and majors who spoke to their differing experiences at Yale-NUS, what initially attracted students to Yale-NUS, and what aspects of their Yale-NUS experience are enduringly memorable.

Interviews with staff and faculty

To add further depth to my research, I conducted 10 elite interviews with key staff and faculty who have worked at Yale-NUS during its various phases, informed by Hochshild's (2009) standards for rigorous interviews (para. 10). The term elite "indicates a person who is chosen by name or position for a particular reason, rather than randomly or anonymously" for an interview to conceptually map the "history or development of a phenomenon" – in this case, the ambassadorial spirit of Yale-NUS students (Hochschild, 2009, para. 1). Interviewees were selected according to the roles they worked in and the extent

to which their work directly impacted Yale-NUS students' expectations and experience. The interviewees included staff from admissions, the Student Affairs Office (SAO), and the Centre for International & Professional Experience (CIPE), as well as faculty that have participated in designing the common curriculum. These faculty span the humanities, social sciences, and sciences and teach in various majors at Yale-NUS. Some alumni-turned staff members at Yale-NUS were also interviewed to compare their experiences as students in the early batches and understand their transition to staff. These expert interviews were each 60-90 minutes long and asked participants semistructured questions pertaining to their roles and were conducted in person when possible, online otherwise. I recorded the interviews for transcription, for which I used Otter.ai. My reporting protocol has been borrowed from Bleich & Pekkanen's (2013) Interview Methods Appendix, which includes the sample frame, role, format, length, and recording method of the interview.

Overall, the purpose of these interviews was to understand the selection process for Yale-NUS students and how signature programs of Yale-NUS were conceptualized and implemented. Moreover, interviews enabled comparisons between staff and faculty perspectives regarding the programs and initiatives Yale-NUS has piloted versus student experiences participating in such programs. I utilized Dedoose, a mixed-methods data analysis software, to thematically code survey responses and interview transcripts and to conduct comparisons. As per Braun and Clark's framework for thematic analysis, I took an iterative approach and developed a codebook with parent and child codes for comprehensive and inclusive coding before grouping codes into broader themes (Ahmed et al., 2025, pp. 2-3). Altogether, my two-pronged methodology is designed to enable multiple axes of comparison to bolster the depth of my description of the everyday experiences at Yale-NUS and draw conclusions for cross-applicable lessons learned from the short-lived Yale-NUS experiment.

RESULTS

Hence, I present three findings about the "culture" of Yale-NUS, a highly abstract term referred to by several staff, faculty, and student interlocutors. Yale-NUS College's "talent cultivation model" according to Chen et al. (2019) consists of recruiting outstanding students globally and exposing students to an internationalized and interdisciplinary curriculum, which is taught by an international teaching team utilizing diverse teaching models (pp. 1183-1185). Similarly, I discuss below the characteristics of students, students' relationships with each other, and students' relationships with the institution as an alternate perspective on the Yale-NUS model, with a particular focus on how ambassadorial spirit is generated.

Characteristics of students

Among the staff and faculty I interviewed, the students were the stand-out factor of Yale-NUS. Interviewees used a variety of terms to describe the abstract

element that makes Yale-NUS students special, for example, "perfect storm" or "special sauce." The first element required for Yale-NUS students' ambassadorial spirit is the characteristics of students selected by admissions and who choose to come to Yale-NUS – in other words, the traits they have prior to matriculation contribute to Yale-NUS "culture." Cheng's (2018) comparative study of the "liberal arts educated system" includes an examination of the Yale-NUS brand, in which the admissions office emphasized selection based on traits such as "academic achievement, intellectual curiosity, entrepreneurial spirit, global mindedness, leadership, community engagement, and sense of adventure" (p. 624). These traits were commonly referred to by my interviewees as curiosity, having diverse and multiple interests, and a strong work ethic, in addition to having a passion for community-building.

The admissions staff interviewed shared that even as the college grew over time, one constantly sought-after trait was "academic superstars", who would be likely to succeed in a competitive college environment. Although traditional metrics such as yield rate remained important, the guiding principle of admissions at Yale-NUS was to prioritize a student's fit with the College – in other words, admissions staff were not only concerned with matriculating a student but also ensuring that they would graduate in four years' time having enjoyed their experience at Yale-NUS. In addition to seeking out academic high achievers with global perspectives, the admissions team expanded what they were looking for in an ideal student over time alongside the growth of the College. In the first few batches, admissions searched distinctly for students who were driven and passionate about creating new traditions and laying the foundation for the culture of the community: "go-getters, leaders, initiators, loud voices." The first two pioneering classes matriculated even before the new campus was completed. For Yale-NUS students, choosing a college was not only about quality education but also about rich opportunities to engage in student life as an active participant:

> Student life is a big reason why I chose Yale-NUS. From clubs that boast of inclusive and intimate societies to events that my college plans and hosts, I have enjoyed a spectacular array of moments that make me call Yale-NUS home.

Alumni remarked that they were drawn to the opportunity to create something new instead of intimidated by it. This was echoed by faculty, who observed that while all Yale-NUS students are consistently excited about new challenges, the first few batches had to be even more risk-tolerant and "extra, extra weird" to decide to join Yale-NUS.

Following batches less strongly identified with this entrepreneurial spirit, actively engaging in the community in terms of continuation, not creation. As the college became more established, students were attracted by its brand reputation and other experiences offered. One admissions staff framed it this way: "There came a point where [we thought] now we have space for some of the quiet doers who want to lead from the back," and "there was space to really craft a more balanced community of students." Faculty members noted one consistency was

that students were "smart people from weird places…who were a little bit disobedient intellectually" and "exceptionally curious in a very sincere way."

When COVID-19 hit, the admissions team once again made an intentional decision to recruit more regionally, with fewer students coming from Europe or North America given the difficulty of international travel. This response was somewhat reactionary but also preemptive – the admissions team was concerned that fewer families would be comfortable sending their students to such a distance. Contrary to the previous years of expanding global outreach, COVID-19 forced a recalibration toward the Southeast Asia region.

The financial aid policy change implemented in 2019 affected the recruitment of the class of 2025 – international applications were need-aware, while Singaporean applications remained need-blind. An admissions staff member reflected upon this change:

> Would the school still have been very culturally rich? Yes. But we would have had fewer students on financial aid, and the number of countries represented would have gone down...it's a shame. However, I do not think that means the College would have been the lesser for it, I just think it would have taken on a different shape.

Only one batch was admitted after this major policy shift, so it is difficult to ascertain the impact that it may have had for the future of Yale-NUS College.

All in all, the individual students' characteristics as passionate, curious, community-oriented, in addition to the diverse blend of students altogether, contribute to the ambassadorial spirit of Yale-NUS. One professor noted,

> I think it had to do with…its internationalism [and] having this host population [of] Singapore students [who] were a bit more cloistered…their worlds were sometimes a little narrower. They came into very productive contact with all of these people from all over the place…[from] these countries that you honestly probably could not locate on a map.

This appreciation of the diversity of the student body was echoed by students and alumni as well, indicating a wider acknowledgment of the benefits of diversity among the Yale-NUS community.

Students' relationships with one another

Given that ambassadorial spirit is not necessarily inherent in every student, my second finding identifies common experiences that foster close bonds among a very diverse population. Some resonant elements of the Yale-NUS experience that surfaced in my survey include the opportunities to "build" or "create" in student organizations or participate in campus traditions and regular events, in addition to facets of residential and student life. Interviewees noted that the diversity of the student body was not an obstacle to a strong sense of community but rather served as the foundation. One professor commented,

> I think that the diversity of the student body is very, very important. Even when…one would anticipate [differences] could be kind of conflictual, or fractious, I think that is a good thing. I think people's differences made for a more coherent community rather than more coherent communities where I find they have a very weak glue.

Several professors drew comparisons between student bodies at Yale-NUS versus other LACs or Singaporean universities, remarking on the significance of diversity in bringing people together through their commonalities despite many differences.

Early common experiences that all Yale-NUS students participate in were key to this bonding between students as well. For many students, the two-week orientation was one of their first prolonged encounters with other Yale-NUS students after matriculating and "a great way to rapidly build community," according to an alumnus. The Common Curriculum is another key experience comprising the bulk of the first two academic years. The Yale-NUS Common Curriculum was designed with the notion of building a community of learning in mind (Lewis, 2018, p. 35). One faculty member commented on the Common Curriculum:

> Everyone goes through the same reading[s], same texts. I think that is pretty important, not just for the academic side of things, but…also culture, where every year students have gone through these things and you struggle together, you can talk to anyone in Yale-NUS and they would know…And I feel like that makes it…what they call the Yale-NUS experience.

Students and alumni echoed this sentiment as well, expressing that "It was a shared common experience with other students that [became] the foundation for many of our friendships and memories of the college, as well as a commonality with future batches of students."

Week 7, a week-long experiential component of the Common Curriculum, was also highlighted as a signature common experience. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restraints, the class of 2024 experienced a modified Week 7 confined to Singapore, and the class of 2025 did not have Week 7 at all. Even so, survey respondents from the affected batches expressed that they "felt cheated out of" a core promised element of the Yale-NUS experience. Overall, survey respondents expressed appreciation for these common elements of the Yale-NUS experience even if they did not personally enjoy every part, recognizing the value of the common bonds formed among Yale-NUS students, as well as the ways in which the Common Curriculum, Week 7, and resulting conversations with people from diverse backgrounds "opened up" their worlds and makes "the engagement [between students] distinctive."

In addition to the early common experiences that bond students together, other forums and opportunities for ongoing interaction with batchmates and upper/underclassmen exist as well. The residential model enables bonding among suites or in each of the three residential colleges' (RC) events, such as the start

and end of semester dinners. At a young institution such as Yale-NUS College, there have been many concerted efforts by staff and students alike to create Yale-NUS-specific traditions instead of borrowing from Yale or NUS. Theater and arts performances have been put on by Yale-NUS students since the start, and after COVID-19 restrictions in Singapore were eased, two signature annual band concerts, "Bread & Jam" and "Tape Days", returned. Other regular events, such as the annual Diversity Week, Sexual Wellness Week, and cultural celebrations, are organized by the Student Affairs Office, student organizations, or passionate student committees. One student framed it this way: "These events make Yale-NUS more than a school; it draws people around a common identity of [Yale-NUS] and gives us moments to reminisce about in years to come." In sum, common experiences, although continuously revised throughout the years, are fundamental to students bonding with each other despite their differences. This foundation transcends cohorts, as generations of Yale-NUS students could identify with the common experiences and struggles that other batches have gone through or would go through in the future.

Students' relationships with Yale-NUS College

In addition to students' more horizontal relationships with each other serving as the foundation of the strong sense of community, students' vertical relationships with Yale-NUS College as an institution are important to the culture of Yale-NUS as well. In other words, students come to identify strongly with Yale-NUS College as they interact with staff and faculty members and become invested in not only their own experience but also the broader community and future of the College. However, the Yale-NUS community is not limited to the student body. Staff and faculty have close bonds with each other and a perceived stake in Yale-NUS as a whole and are highly accessible to students, who also form bonds with the staff and faculty and collaborate in shaping the Yale-NUS experience. Through interactions with staff and faculty, hierarchical relationships between students and staff or faculty are traditionally flattened, and the understanding of community is expanded beyond the student body to include staff and faculty as well.

Students' interactions with staff, faculty, and various policies represent their relationship with their institution. The strength of these relationships can be conceptualized under two driving values: student empowerment and student care. Student empowerment is both a structural and cultural feature of Yale-NUS. There are formal roles that enable students to provide input, such as the student government, as well as informal access to senior administration figures by appointment or encounters at residential life events. Many paid positions are supported by various departments as well, ranging from student associate positions in Admissions, CIPE, Student Affairs Office, to peer tutoring positions with the Writers' Centre or for language or subject tutoring, to research positions with professors. These paid positions are open to both international and local students and are opportunities for students to earn money as well as gain professional development. Furthermore, the ethos of student empowerment is

embedded within everyday interactions with staff and faculty. One staff member emphasized how students take initiative to propose projects:

> I'm really proud that our students are like, 'I have an idea and I want to make it happen, how do I do it? This is how I need support.' I like the fact that they can articulate that, and that they want to make things happen and they see themselves as people who are able to make a difference with the resources that they have now, [this] is really the aim of this office.

The attitude that staff have toward students also shapes these interactions to empower students, as one staff member articulated: "I realized, here, like the fundamental shift was you truly have to work with students, because students know what is going on and feel so deeply for the institution. When we get feedback, that is really an opportunity for cooperation." Viewing student feedback and criticism as an opportunity to improve the policies and programs and making students' voices feel heard in the feedback process contributes significantly to empowering students. Faculty members also express care for students: "I feel that the pandemic and the closure brought a kind of a heaviness to…student life, which the faculty worried nonstop [about]…We were all truly concerned about students' mental wellbeing."

For the ethos of student care, the way staff look after the wellbeing of students beyond their academic success is an important part of feeling safe and cared for in and by the institution. By institutional design, there are many intersecting layers of student care, including the Assistant Dean, Residential Life Officer, Residential College Advisor, Academic Advisor/Major Advisor, and CIPE Advisor assigned to students. One staff member spoke to their experience working in residential life:

> It's really caring for students, organizing events for them, as well as being on duty – so emergency contact, whenever a student has a mental health or physical distress, or what could be anything and…situations like emotional or relationship matters, mental health, some level [of] academic pressure, issues with family systems…that is really a broad range. Honestly, a huge part of the job is student care.

Furthermore, the staff emphasized how Yale-NUS thinks students ought to be treated in the face of hardships:

> I think when the going gets tough, which is a natural experience in life, are we going to just ask [students] to, you know, push on, push on, suck it up? Or do we have room for them to grow and change? I think we do.

Although there is some unevenness across faculty responses to proposed student support policies, such as free passes to be able to miss class without a documented reason, faculty in general maintain high expectations and correspondingly high support for students, as expressed by one founding faculty member:

> What I also say is that my expectations are high, but I will support you 100%. We also have great support here…and I do feel like you can have high, very high expectations as long as you're willing to put in the work to support the students.

The depth of students' vested interest in the institution regarding not only their own experience but also the future generations of students is perhaps best demonstrated by the strong reactions to policy changes perceived by students as out of line with the values of the college. In instances such as the financial aid policy change to become need-blind for international students, student concerns surrounding the policy were mostly expressed in future terms, as the policy would not have affected current students. In a similar vein, alumni expressed empathy for their juniors who were impacted by COVID-19 and the announcement of the closure. Central themes in survey responses included "safe space," "support," "resources," and "home" when students and alumni articulated how they felt about Yale-NUS.

DISCUSSION

The three findings above illustrate the intrinsic value of the Yale-NUS model, but an institution must also consider the challenges of generating revenue and the sustainability of the business model. Many of the key features of Yale-NUS are replicable, such as its Orientation and Common Curriculum, and many similar features already exist elsewhere at other well-resourced and diverse international branch campuses or small liberal arts colleges with similar values. However, since many of the strengths of Yale-NUS rely on its human and financial resources, not all elements are replicable. For example, Week 7 and experiential learning offered at Yale-NUS require substantial teaching resources and collaboration across departments, in addition to financing for overseas trips – in consideration of sustainability, the College had been moving toward Week 7 and other travel to take place more locally (Khoo & Craig, 2018, p. 28). In addition, Yale-NUS College's value of accessibility is limited by its small student population, as its budget and financial model was based on admitting 250 students in every batch. Its reputation for being highly selective and elite also stands in persistent contradiction to the internationalization-at-home experience, and Yale-NUS faced institutional pressures from key stakeholders, in particular, NUS and MOE, to maintain a balance and scale up.

Finally, the Yale-NUS model, although not necessarily unique worldwide, is unique in the Singaporean context and represents a bubble-like space for advocacy, enabling conversations less prevalent in wider Singapore. One professor expressed this bubble effect in explaining why they had chosen to stay until the end:

> I believe this very strongly – this is gonna be looked back upon as this kind of very interesting moment in time…an opening. Things were possible socially, and in terms of LGBTQ life, in terms of public conversation, things were possible in terms of teaching, people came

> here that would not have come here, it just created a world and that world had to end. However, while that world is still going on, you kind of want to be in it as long as you can.

The findings of this research reiterate the age-old cautionary tale for cross-border HEIs, including IBCs and partnerships, to strike the right balance between internationalization and localization (Altbach, 2015; Stanfield, 2014, p. 4; Wilkins, 2015, pp. 1389-1390). Although Yale-NUS's adaptations to its context are unlikely to be replicable for other institutions, it serves as a reminder for other institutions to consider their circumstances in making strategic decisions about student selection and curation of the student experience. Finally, in the developing body of research on students' sense of belonging, the Yale-NUS case study offers a model for potentially reproducing the students' ambassadorial spirit and conceives of the community extending beyond students to include the staff and faculty, whose sense of belonging represents a ripe topic for further inquiry (Wilson et al., 2025, p. 147).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the study of cross-border higher education models in several ways. First, the focus on students' perspectives is an empirical contribution, as qualitative methods were applied to a highly discussed and understudied aspect of higher education institutions. This study elucidates which draw factors initially attracted students to Yale-NUS, as well as how the strong culture and "ambassadorial spirit" are generated. My metaphor of Yale-NUS as an embassy and students as its ambassadors is distinct from Lane's (2016) discussion of international relations programs overseas and "embassies of knowledge" (p. 353), and I focus instead on which factors enable students' identification as proud ambassadors of the College.

In addition to this empirical contribution, my research has two conceptual contributions. The first pertains to IaH; I have linked faculty and staff interviews with student survey responses to articulate how Yale-NUS was designed with internationalization strategies in mind and evaluated to what extent these were successful. In many cases, students, staff, and faculty alike identified further improvements to be made upon contested policies and programs but also expressed pride in what the Yale-NUS model had produced thus far. Regarding the Common Curriculum, one student mentioned that "[it] was a wonderful intellectual experience and [going] through the same class together made the entire academic experience so fulfilling…like everyone had learned a language together," in spite of its imperfections; altogether, Yale-NUS "is greater than the sum of its parts." In addition to evidence of widespread student satisfaction, strong faculty buy-in and investment in global learning was prevalent at Yale-NUS, a key to success of IaH (Agnew & Kahn, 2014, p. 36), The "East meets West" mentality was mentioned by many students as a draw factor, and expectations for the execution of this aim appeared to be met as Yale-NUS students embodied the "ambassadorial spirit."

My second conceptual contribution pertains to ISMs, as international student research reflects a dominant focus on North America (Bista et al., 2026, p. 115). My research has discussed the significance of intra-Asia education migration, with Yale-NUS perhaps being more unique regionally, as a staff member highlighted: "Yale-NUS [is] more regionally unique than…globally unique… what makes Yale-NUS unique is [its] location situated in the world." Furthermore, beyond considering the institutional mobility in the establishment of Yale-NUS in Singapore, my findings demonstrate how students' experiences at Yale-NUS have shifted their perceptions of individual mobility. This has manifested in increased openness due to international learning experiences, differences in perceived mobility after graduation, and expanded networks globally and online.

Finally, I propose a practical contribution: the Yale-NUS model distilled in these findings may prove useful for administrators looking to apply the lessons learned at Yale-NUS to their own campuses, branch or otherwise, particularly in evoking the "ambassadorial spirit." Key recommendations include enhancing horizontal relationships between students by developing structured common experiences, whether academic or cocurricular. To enhance vertical relationships between students and the university, offer a variety of on-campus jobs and establish clear pipelines for student care.

Potential limitations to this research include self-selection bias in my survey respondents and interviewees, who likely had particularly strong and/or positive opinions about Yale-NUS. This may lead to an underrepresentation of more negative or neutral sentiments toward Yale-NUS. The sample also lacked representation of exchange students or the minority of students who transferred out of Yale-NUS, who may have very different perspectives considering the shorter temporality of their experience at Yale-NUS. In a similar vein, my interviews with staff and faculty may also lack a complete spectrum of perceptions, a limitation I attempted to overcome by selecting interviewees who have worked at Yale-NUS during different periods and amounts of time and choosing to include people who have since chosen to leave Yale-NUS. All in all, my research has been colored by my own positionality as a Yale-NUS graduate and my embeddedness in the "total institution" of Yale-NUS as a student, then later as alumnus and staff member (Davies, 1989, p. 77). This research has both benefited from and been limited by my high degree of access to the Yale-NUS community, as my survey relied on convenience and snowball sampling. Ultimately, this research project has aimed to articulate these abstract conceptions of community and culture that engender a deep sense of belonging among Yale-NUS students.

Future avenues for research include longitudinal studies capturing the complex changes in students' perceptions of self, community, and mobility throughout their university education or focused studies on alumni pathways and choices and the effect on a college's branding and reputation. Studies further elucidating the draw factors for students, particularly for IBCs or other cross-border higher education institutions, can help to inform institutional priorities and student attraction strategies in the future and could be multisited to allow for comparisons at the regional or global scale, a suggestion also promoted by Ge &

Ho (2014, p. 205). Further study on student or staff and faculty belonging at higher education institutions can provide additional models and strategies for improving institutional culture.

One memorable quote from an admissions staff member lingers with me:

> The work of the students and creating great reputation for the school and having good experience, the faculty who were creating amazing opportunities in the classroom, all of that builds a story. And it then just became our job to tell that story. We did not create the institution. But we tell the story of the institution.

Altogether, I hope that this research helps to tell the story of Yale-NUS while prompting further research and experimentation to improve higher education opportunities for international students.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:

☑ *None*
☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
☐ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
☐ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
☐ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

This article incorporates no content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1: Survey questions for Yale-NUS Students and Alumni

Background information	1. What is your graduating year? 2. How would you describe your gender? 3. What is your nationality? 4. How did you hear about Yale-NUS College? 5. What was your major (and minor, if applicable) at Yale-NUS College? 6. What is your current occupation?
Attraction factors	7. To what extent did the following factors affect your decision to attend Yale-NUS College? (4-point Likert scale: to a major extent, to a fair extent, to a minor extent, to an insignificant extent) 8. What other factors, if any, affected your decision to attend Yale-NUS College?
Open-ended questions	9. How did (*factor*) contribute to your Yale-NUS experience? a. Academics (Capstone, common curriculum, etc.) b. Student life (Student organizations, student government, traditions/events, etc.) c. Residential life (suite living, first year orientation, residential college identity, etc.) d. International/experiential learning (Week 7, semester abroad, etc.) 10. In your opinion, what makes Yale-NUS unique? 11. Did the COVID-19 pandemic change your memories, recollections, and/or experiences at Yale-NUS College? If so, how? 12. Does the closure impact the way you think and feel about your experiences and/or memories at Yale-NUS College? 13. Looking back on your Yale-NUS experience, is there anything you would've done differently? 14. If there is anything else you'd like to share about your experience at Yale-NUS College, please use the space below.

Table A2: Descriptive statistics of survey participants, N=89

Variable	Count	Share of total
Graduating year		
2017	3	3.37%
2018	2	2.25%
2019	11	12.36%
2020	6	6.74%
2021	13	14.61%
2022	10	11.24%
2023	18	20.22%
2024	16	17.98%
2025	10	11.24%
Gender		
Male	27	30.34%
Female	57	64.04%
Nonbinary	3	3.37%
Prefer not to say	2	2.25%
Nationality		
Singapore	46	51.69%
United States of America	5	5.62%
Philippines	3	3.37%
Canada	2	2.25%
India	2	2.25%
Malaysia	2	2.25%
New Zealand	2	2.25%
Taiwan	2	2.25%
Bulgaria	1	1.12%
France	1	1.12%
Indonesia	1	1.12%
Kenya	1	1.12%
Mongolia	1	1.12%
Pakistan	1	1.12%
Paraguay	1	1.12%
United Kingdom	1	1.12%
Prefer not to say	17	19.10%
Major		
Anthropology	4	4.49%
Arts and Humanities	5	5.62%
Economics	7	7.87%
Environmental Studies	15	16.85%
Global Affairs	9	10.11%
History	5	5.62%
Life Sciences	2	2.25%
Literature	1	1.12%
Mathematical, Computational, and Statistical Sciences	9	10.11%
Philosophy		
Philosophy, Politics and Economics	0	0.00%
Physical Sciences	7	7.87%
Psychology	1	1.12%
Urban Studies	12	13.48%
Double Degree Programme in Law and Liberal Arts	9	10.11%
	3	3.37%

APPENDIX B

Table B1: Interview Questions for Staff and Faculty

Background information	1.	What is/was your role at Yale-NUS College? (*title + description of their work*)
	2.	What influenced your decision to work at Yale-NUS College?
Role-specific questions	3.	As (*specific role*), what did/do you consider as the most important and/or meaningful parts of your job?
For people who previously worked at Yale-NUS	4.	What was Yale-NUS like while you worked there?
For alumni	5.	Why did you choose to attend Yale-NUS as a student?
	6.	What was Yale-NUS like when you were a student compared to now?
	7.	How did you transition from being a student to being a (*specific role*) at Yale-NUS College?
Reflection	8.	What were the most successful programs or projects you contributed to? Which were the most difficult?
	9.	What makes Yale-NUS unique and how does it compare to other institutions you've worked at?
	10.	Based on your experience at Yale-NUS, if you were to start another institution like Yale-NUS, what are some lessons learned that you'd apply? What would you do differently/the same way?

Table B2: Interview Methods Appendix

Interviewee	Role(s)	Source	Format	Length	Recording Method
A	CIPE, SAO, Alumni	Sample frame	Semistructured	60 min	Audio, supplementary notes
B	Residential Life, SAO, Alumni	Sample frame	Semistructured	60 min	Audio, supplementary notes
C	Professor (Sciences), CC, Residential Life	Sample frame	Semistructured	60 min	Audio, supplementary notes
D	Professor (Humanities), CC	Sample frame + peer recommendation	Semistructured	45 min	Audio, supplementary notes
E	Residential Life, Admissions & Financial Aid, CIPE, Alumni	Sample frame	Semistructured	60 min	Audio, supplementary notes
F	Professor (Humanities), CC	Sample frame + peer recommendation	Semistructured	60 min	Audio, supplementary notes
G	Admissions & Financial Aid	Sample frame + advisor recommendation	Semistructured	45 min	Audio, supplementary notes
H	Admissions & Financial Aid	Sample frame	Semistructured	60 min	Audio, Zoom video, supplementary notes
I	Professor (Social Sciences), CC	Sample frame	Semistructured	90 min	Audio, supplementary notes
J	SAO; Residential Life	Sample frame + advisor recommendation	Semistructured	30 min	Audio, supplementary notes