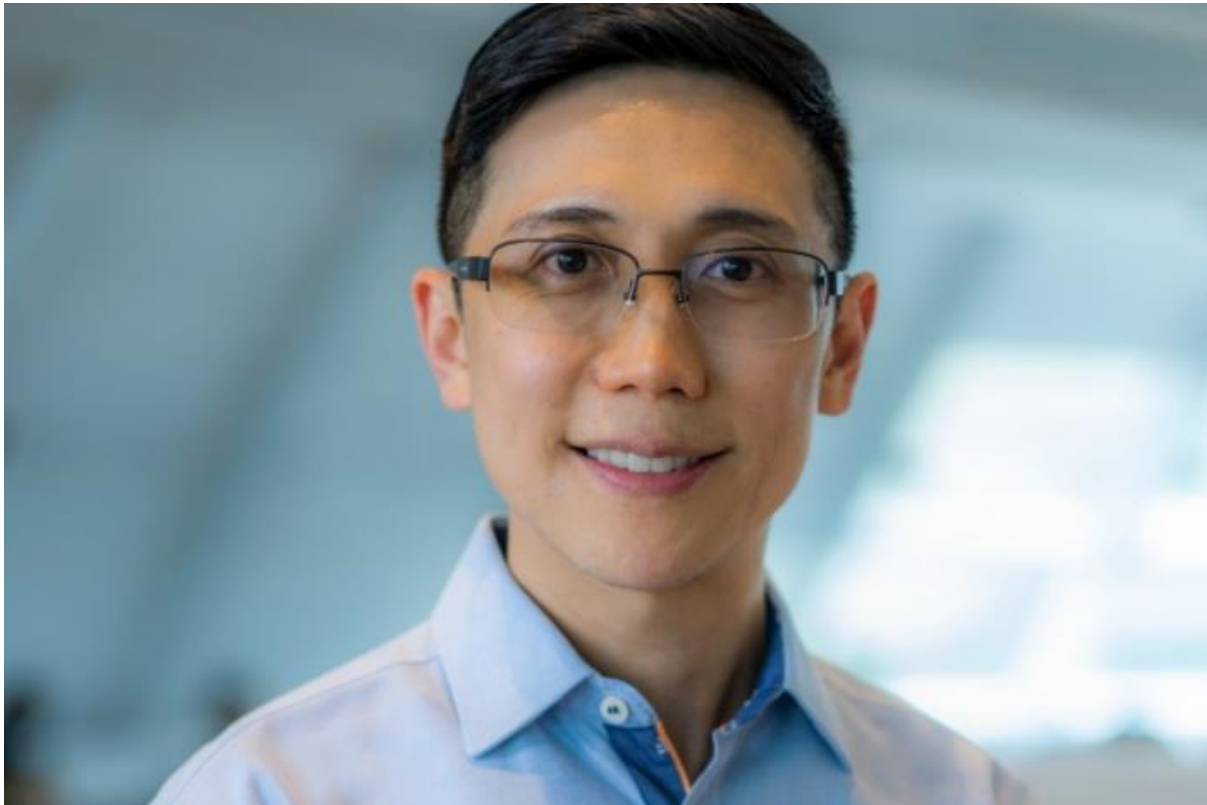


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Headline: Integrating multiple disciplines for new solutions

Integrating multiple disciplines for new solutions



By Alvin Lee

SMU Office of Research & Tech Transfer – Singapore Management University (SMU) announced in May the establishment of its seventh School, the College of Integrative Studies (CIS), with its first intake of up to 100 students in Academic Year 2023/24. The vision of the CIS is to produce graduates who “will be equipped to look beyond the boundaries of a single discipline, enabling them to make a bold pivot to the new realities of an ever-changing world”.

Two elements of CIS facilitate the inter-disciplinary thrust: The Deferred Declaration of Degree Programme (D3) lets students explore different disciplines in their first year without having to declare a major, while the flagship Individualised Major programme allows students to customise their curriculum with courses from across the entire university.

SMU President Professor Lily Kong said during the CIS launch: “By removing institutional limits on how students can combine disciplines and courses, we offer an extraordinary level of flexibility and range of permutations that makes this degree experience responsive to the needs of government, business and society, and exciting for students and partners alike.”

The question must be asked: What prompted the CIS idea? And perhaps more importantly: How would one convince his/her parents of the value of a Bachelor of Integrative Studies degree?

“We have been thinking about an intensive, aggressive interdisciplinary program for quite a while,” says Professor Elvin Lim, Dean of CIS, pointing to around 2017 when then-Provost Professor Kong started work on revamping the SMU Core Curriculum.

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“It was a challenge... renegotiating boundaries between disciplines, which traditionally meant giving students a lot of choice on the one hand but on the other hand, also articulating a coherent programme with our interdisciplinary innovations.” The Dean elaborates:

“When we pitched the CIS idea [to employers], with few exceptions, people were very excited. My guess is possibly because we were in a midst of a very disruptive pandemic when so much has changed in a matter of months, that there was a sense that the market has an appetite for agile, integrated thinkers.

“[The pandemic] made it more obvious that we can plan and predict all we want, but in the end, our best future proofing is creating graduates who can pivot when there is no plan. Such graduates are able to respond with agility right there and then with a kind of appreciation of the full context of any situation, and full contexts are always interdisciplinary.”

Professor Lim tells the Office of Research and Tech Transfer of the University’s committed efforts to engage employers because “there’s nothing like an employer who can warm the hearts of parents who are understandably more risk averse and careful about their children”, he notes. “When we have captains of industry saying that not only is [integrative studies] not a disadvantage but is actually what the future needs, I think that was when things happened.”

He adds: “Other arguments along the same thread includes, ‘What feels safe may actually be the most unsafe because what I study for today may be for a job that may not be here in four years.’ It feels safe because it’s been done before, but it may actually be the most unsafe.”

“For example, we will need an army of sustainability reporting accountants and managers going forward. To my knowledge there isn’t a specific programme that caters for this yet. Institutions take longer to catch up than individuals. Individual students, supported by the vast resources of SMU and the CIS, can be ahead of their time and be the first, rather than the last, to design a programme and prepare themselves for that new job that is only emerging as a potential career at this time.

“Is this risky? I would say not only is it not risky, it is the safest and wisest thing to do given the disruption of our world.”

America: Tied to the Constitution, for better to worse

Professor Lim is currently working on putting into place systems and procedures so that the School is set up for success in the future. The long-term vision, he says, is to create “an intellectual community where students and faculty are equally enthused about the mission of integrative studies and this is reflected in a distinctive pedagogy and research output”.

Outside of his administrative duties as Dean of CIS, Professor Lim is Professor of Political Science at SMU. His research area focuses on American constitutionalism, and his 2014 book “The Lovers’ Quarrel: The Two Foundings & American Political Development” expounds on the ‘federal authority versus state rights’ argument that lies at the heart of hot-button issues of race, gender, guns, and abortion rights.

When asked if America is facing another 1861 when eleven states seceded over the issue of slavery and sparking the American Civil War, Professor Lim pointed further back to 1776 and 1789 for the origins of the tensions that survive to the present day.

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The Articles of Confederation written after the 1776 Declaration of Independence were guided by the principles of state sovereignty and independence, which resulted in a weak central government. The 1789 Constitution sought to address that issue by listing out the powers of Congress, the Presidency, and the Judiciary; to ensure those powers are not abused, the Bill of Rights were added in 1791, which includes the now infamous Second Amendment that grants the right to bear arms.

“The Constitution itself locks into place two opposing points of view: The second half, the Bill of Rights, is about restraints on government, and the first half is the granting of powers,” he explains. “You could look at many divisive issues in the US through a fundamental, even foundational question: ‘Does the federal government have the power to legislate this?’ versus ‘Does this infringe on certain rights?’

“America is a Constitutional Republic. I don't mean that as a piece of praise, I mean it simply as a description, that the government proceeds via constitutional interpretation. Everything that passes muster, either by way of the Supreme Court or legislatively in Congress, has to have a certain clause within the Constitution that permits it.”

“If these clauses are divaricated onto two paradigms, then the lawyers will have to replay the arguments that were embedded in those texts between 1789 and 1791. If America was a parliamentary democracy like the UK, then they do not have to recourse back to those paradigms because they don't have a written constitution.”

He concludes: “For better or for worse, America will rehearse the words in those texts in every public debate. Hopefully at the end of reading my book, you won't ask, ‘Again?!’ anymore; you would say, ‘Of course, again!’ There's no way out of it.”

Make a change, take a risk, challenge your brain

Despite the social discord and seemingly irreconcilable differences, Professor Lim observes that America is so creative because debate and disagreement are built into the social fabric, and that China offers a contrasting socio-political example because “the social priority of harmony more often than not outranks the social priority of being different or individual”. Taken in the context of his mandate to push the envelope on integrative studies, that observation perhaps serves as an example of weaving different disciplines and the insights from different perspectives together to address a complex issue.

But what is Professor Lim like as a person?

“I have many simple pleasures,” says the salad-loving vegetarian, citing yoga, playing the piano, and walking his King Charles Cavalier and Poodle mix. Sometimes his dog walks him.

“I like to activate both parts of my brain,” says Professor Lim, who also sits on the board of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. “The reason why I like playing a piano is because I can explore an entirely different type of awareness, a musical intelligence, it's nonverbal. Being able to activate that is very liberating. Whenever we activate a different part of ourselves, we feel reborn.

“So, I like to engage in something as simple as brushing my teeth with my left hand even though I'm right-handed, or allowing my dog to walk me (though it is conventionally ill-advised). Whenever you surrender to a side of you that is not normally dominant, a new potential and a new experience arises – that's quite liberating.”

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“I always try to disrupt my conditioned patterns because I know that that is the old brain, the reptilian brain that likes predictability, safety. But all human flourishing has always been based on taking a risk.”

Taking a risk, rather like taking up a degree that has the promise a bit of everything but unlike any other we have seen in Singapore.