Qingdao’s Liberal Arts Initiative sought to encourage Chinese students and professors to reconsider their approach to learning and teaching, while simultaneously fostering the ideals of liberal arts among participants, i.e. a willingness to discuss almost any subject with others and a desire to independently approach material. In this way, Qingdao’s Liberal Arts Initiative strove to achieve an even greater goal, as the desire to learn coupled with a willingness to discuss complicated subjects worked towards breeding an environment of peace among participants, where each individual feels compelled to respectfully explore the world through thought.

Primary funding for Qingdao’s Liberal Arts Initiative came from Davis Projects for Peace, however Bard College’s Center for Civic Engagement generously provided additional funding in the amount of three thousand eight hundred dollars.

The project unfolded in a manner significantly different than what was originally planned. Instead of hosting a single student’s seminar for three weeks while organizing weekly symposiums for six to eight weeks, the program hosted an intensive teacher’s workshop for one week and a student’s seminar for two weeks. The teacher’s workshop was comprised of ten professors from Qingdao University and Qingdao University Teacher’s College. With funding from Bard College’s Center for Civic Engagement, a Chinese speaking Bard professor was hired to instruct this workshop and train the professors in liberal arts. During the week in which the teacher’s workshop occurred, the class met every day Monday through Friday for four hours each day. Six of the ten Chinese professors who participated in this program then took turns instructing the student’s seminar. The student’s seminar met three times a week for two weeks, with two hours of class each session. In this manner not only were the professors afforded the opportunity to use the teaching techniques they had studied, the students were also exposed to a different style of education. Although a potentially smaller group of individuals was impacted in this program design, those who did participate in the initiative surely felt a significantly stronger influence.

The most difficult part of the program was not its implementation, but the planning and organization that occurred before the program began. Even with the ten thousand dollars earned from Davis Projects for Peace, there were still certain budget constraints that limited the potential effectiveness of the program. This made planning difficult. For example, after further discussion with Bard’s Language and Thinking department it was concluded that training, hiring, and flying over a Bard Professor to work with the program, especially in the faculty of training other professors in the liberal arts (i.e. instructing the Teacher’s Workshop), would ensure greater success for the program. However, the additional fees incurred by this idea pushed the budget close to four thousand dollars over its limit. Luckily, after additional fundraising this problem was resolved and we were able to function as well as possible.

The actual enactment of the program once on the ground in Qingdao went surprisingly well. This can be attributed to two facts. First, that myself and the professor hired both speak Mandarin Chinese, and second, that preemptive planning was very thorough. Language posed only the most minuet problems and even many of the anticipated cultural barriers were absent during the program. Despite a lifetime of traditional Chinese education, the vast majority of the participant professors and students quickly adjusted to the liberal arts style of teaching and learning.

That said, the Teacher’s Workshop and the Student’s Seminar were both quite successful, although the Teacher’s Workshop experienced less difficulties. As was anticipated by the Language and Thinking department at Bard College, due to the help of a Bard Professor the Teacher’s Workshop went incredibly smoothly. However, the very nature of the Student’s Seminar allowed room for problems. It ran into difficulties when professors from the Teacher’s Workshop took turns instructing. The success of the six professors who volunteered to teach the Student’s Seminar classes varied according to the
teachers’ ability and the material they chose to work with. For example, on one occasion a professor chose to teach a class on Chinese philosophy. Although he was an excellent instructor, his choice of material proved too difficult for many students. On another occasion a Professor’s reluctance to trust in the liberal arts style of teaching created problems. His approach to education varied significantly from what our program advocated and his mixture of the two approaches proved ineffective in class. On that particular day many of the students left disappointed. Nonetheless, it was important for the teacher and his colleagues to see that certain approaches were more effective than others. It is still important to note that none of the other Student’s Seminar classes experienced problems like these, so it was still very successful.

The future of Qingdao’s Liberal Arts Initiative is bright. The program was very successful in spreading liberal arts education and the intrinsic values that liberal arts holds onto its participants. By the end of the program nine out of ten of the teachers advocated for China to use liberal arts and all of the teachers said that the program changed how they think about education. The student’s were of the same opinion, saying that they will now approach studying in a new, active way. Because several of the students are studying to become teachers themselves, they also said that the program certainly influenced how they will come to instruct classes in the future. In this manner, the program not only strongly influenced all twenty three participants, it also will influence all the various students who will come in contact with the teachers involved in our program. With such a long lasting chain of influence, even just this first year of the program left an incalculable impact among our participants and future individuals.

In the years to come the program’s influence will become even greater. Discussion with Bard College will further hone future manifestations of the program and ensure that China or even various other countries can consider using the liberal arts style of teaching and philosophy. The blueprint laid out by this program will allow liberal arts to move anywhere around the world, while at the same time, the footprint left by our efforts in Qingdao have created a space for liberal arts to further establish itself within China. Both exploration of other countries and further work with Qingdao and China are possible future forms of this initiative, but regardless of what shape it takes the success of this year’s program will ensure that the future of Qingdao’s Liberal Arts Initiative is filled with possibility and certain growth.

Peace is an environment where one can freely, but respectfully express one’s own views without fear of prosecution from others. Peace is a responsibility that each individual carries with them, to respect fellow humans and the culture, ideas, and traditions that each person holds as creed.

Liberal arts necessarily functions on this environment of peace in order to successfully encourage all students to explore material on their own. Our program contributes to creating an environment of peace by bringing the liberal arts style of education and the values of respect and equality it imparts to a country that currently struggles to endow such ideals in its students – China.

In the short term, this project has encouraged twenty three students and teachers to create environments of peace around themselves and to willfully and respectfully engage with others about occasionally sensitive topics. In the long term, teachers involved with the project will engage with students in new ways, again fostering an environment of peace. This will allow those students to begin to create an environment of peace around themselves and encourage others to do the same.

Qingdao’s Liberal Arts Initiative has changed the way I view peace, it has shown me that it is not necessarily the responsibility of politics and heads of state to create peace, but that of each individual person to create an environment of peace around themselves. The program has shown me this is difficult to achieve, but that with effort and thorough planning an environment of peace through learning can be brought anywhere throughout the world. Chinese professors and students, who had never encountered a liberal arts style of education, were able to easily create an environment of peace around themselves to respectfully engage with their peers and learn a great deal at the same time.

“Peace is not a lofty goal that you tirelessly fight for throughout your life, peace is an environment which you can create in this very moment. Peace is what you bring with you out into the world, when you agree with others and when you argue with others, it is a space in which we can all be heard, all be forgiven, and all learn.” -Willem Molesworth
(Top: Teacher’s Workshop in action. Bottom: Students in groups during the Student’s Seminar.)