A new FLAME lights up

An MBA and Liberal Education school, near Pune, that is attempting something quite different.

The Foundation for Liberal and Management Education (FLAME) certainly has its heart in the right place. Started in 2004, by five visionaries, who believed that individual freedom was central to education, FLAME started a one-of-its-kind undergraduate course called Liberal Education, in Maharashtra.

Covering a host of topics ranging from creative writing to physics, philosophy to foreign languages, the four-year Liberal Education course aims to provide students a grounding in various topics, before they pick the subjects they’d like to major in. The first two years are spent with them trying their hands at many fun and interesting things (film making and gender studies, to name a few, among the 30-odd foundation courses offered), while the next two years are focused on their major and minor courses.

That’s not all. Prof Himanshu Navangul, Dean for Student Activities, insists this even better than a Liberal Arts course, one usually goes abroad for. “We offer more than just humanitarian studies. There’s compulsory sports, courses in broadcast journalism, photography, NGO-related activities. Why, we even started a horse-back riding class recently!” He adds, later in the conversation, “I think we are an American campus on Indian soil.”

Navangul is equally excited about the post-graduation schools opened on campus - one is a business school and the other a school for communication. “This year our first batch of post-graduates will pass out,” he informs me.

The two-year-old school is situated 18-kms away from Pune and offers students the ideal get-away place to ideate and bond with fellow batchmates. “The location also makes it mandatory for all students to live on campus, which means more contact with their lecturers,” avers Prof Navangul. This last point brings up an interesting topic - the guru-shishya methodology. FLAME swears by it. “It is important to mentor students, to be there for them when they need you. Every teacher has a minimum of 14 students ‘under’ him. Officially they meet once a week, but they can contact us anytime. Students come to us with problems ranging from peer pressure issues to difficulty over course materials. Whatever needs they have, we are there to lend a helping hand.”

Being away from the city can cause students to feel disoriented during their initial days. “They are kids after all. Even if they are 21, they are still children,” Navangul says about his mentees. “I have 18 students. I don’t see them everyday, but whenever they have a problem I am there. This is like friendship for life.”

The communication students have much to cheer about, considering the campus’ proximity to Mumbai. Several celebrities and scientists have visited the students in the last two years - Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Meghna Gulzar and Rahul Bose, to name a few of the better known names.

While the institute is yet to lay claim to having research labs on campus, research is still, nonetheless, part of the daily rigmarole. Explains Navangul, “Research could be done on field or even in libraries. What is important is the skill to do research. In India, we are weak in this area. What we should do is train students early on, on the methodology to conduct research.”

Interdisciplinary learnings also form an important part of the program. “When I teach them physics, I also explain how physics is involved in music or with our bodies. Since I can see its relevance in other disciplines, I can help them see it too. Once you do that, students get more interested. That’s one of the basic tenets of our pedagogy here.”

The school currently has 385 students on campus, of which nearly 180 are part of the undergraduate course. In these times of economic uncertainty, a question about the placements of their management grads is inevitable. “Our placement team, including Indira (one of the founders and President of FLAME) are working very hard. But I’d be lying if I said we aren’t worried.” Things will change, he adds. “Of course I am optimistic. You’d be too, if you visited our campus.”

Visit: www.flame.edu.in for more details about the courses. Also check out what the students have to say on www.flamepune.blogspot.com.

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