

Let Students Learn More About Donors

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THERE is nothing ostensibly wrong with naming colleges and buildings after individuals who have made generous donations. After all, these gifts will broaden opportunities for students in financial need, and finance an assortment of academic and co-curricular programmes in the schools.

However, the practice would be more meaningful if the students knew more about the private gifts and their donors, and if they were given more information about the backgrounds of these personalities.

Within a few months, the National University of Singapore has seen two buildings named in recognition or honour of donors: The former Angsana College was renamed the College of Alice & Peter Tan ("NUS college named after couple who gave big donation"; Jan 28), while a multi-purpose complex at University Town has been named the Stephen Riady Centre ("New building at NUS' UTown named after tycoon"; last Saturday).

While the university administration has been justifying the naming endeavours - primarily in terms of the substantial sums donated - students, particularly users of the various facilities, have not had the opportunity to find out more. Many would be interested to know about the biographies of these donors, as well as their non-monetary contributions.

While some donors might be apprehensive about divulging more about themselves, the insistence upon safeguarding their privacy might further the misconception that the size of the donation is the sole reason for naming the facilities after them.

Even if the donors reckon that the question of "who they are" is not crucial, it would be worthwhile to hear their views on education and philanthropy, specifically through on-the-ground interactions with the students they have helped.

It would be interesting to hear their perspectives on education, and how they think their contributions could be used. Can they relate to the aspirations of the students? How can their personal stories encourage or inspire more to do their part for their communities?

Some might argue pragmatically that these supposedly pedantic demands might deter future donations. Nevertheless, encouraging greater disclosure and hands-on participation by the donors will amplify the significance of the donation.

Names of buildings should also honour accomplishments beyond monetary inputs. Otherwise, we risk giving the impression that every new building has a price tag, and that cash is the sole determinant for a person's name to be plastered over it.

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