The Future of University College Roosevelt:

A Response to the Reorientation Plan

(Dated: May 3, 2019)

In response to the undemocratic changes imposed on the faculty and students by the management of UCR on April 25th 2019, we feel the urge to take action against these injustices. It is clear that the management did not wish to engage in a dialogue with the affected parties regarding the intentions and consequences of the changes, and their subsequent impacts on the future of our institutions and our lives.

This document is an attempt to embody the effervescence of our communal sentiments that have been catalyzed as a result of the imposed changes. We hope that this document serves as a viable means to: engage in an improbable dialogue with the management regarding the changes and to hinder similar things from happening in the future, and to empower us to speak and act in response to these changes. While we are aware that some decisions will unfortunately not be reconsidered, we remain hopeful that some will be revised through democratic processes and spirit. This document serves the purpose of raising our voices through a more formal means, and is an invitation to all students who share negative thoughts and feelings to mobilize themselves in an act of solidarity. Let us unite in a coalitional No! that affirms our disapproval, and respond with multiple Yeses that embody our hopes and desires.

We have attempted to outline our major concerns regarding the future of UCR in light of the changes. Among these concerns, we note: the undemocratic procedures that have accompanied these changes; a deviation from the LAS degrees core philosophy and values; a stagnation and a decrease in the quality of education of many existing disciplines; the prioritization of creating a productive workforce rather than a civically engaged, creative and virtuous individual; a potentially harmful impact on the tight knit social community; and the death of UCR as being a unique haven for people that want to contribute towards a better world and healthier earth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) reminds of an ancient and noble tradition where education came to mean the flourishing of the human being through the pursuit of arts such as music, poetry, literature, dance and philosophy together with the study of the natural sciences. It also implied that the instillation of values and the daunting search for an ethical life were central to this pursuit. Ultimately, its purpose is the creation of a free-thinking human being ready to be civically engaged and committed to make a difference in
the world.

University College Roosevelt (UCR) inscribes itself in this tradition. Or at least, it did.

On the 25th of April 2019, UCR took some managerial steps that, we believe, are altering the very essence of our university. On the 26th of April 2019, during the rush of our lunch break in the busy final weeks of our semester, an info session was held that was portrayed as being an attempt and desire to engage in a dialogue to communicate the drastic changes that were imposed on our fellow professors and students. However, not only were students and professors left unconsidered in the decision making process, we also felt like we were not being heard, or even given the opportunity to be heard, during the input session which proved to be a facade, showing no intention for dialogue. A valuable amount of time was used up on presenting the document outlining the changes that was published the day prior, and which was the reason for the meeting in the first place. Subsequently, we believe that only the surface of the problem was touched upon.

The changes made by the management on the 25th of April 2019 have evoked many distinct yet intertwined concerns. Among these concerns, we note: the undemocratic procedures that have accompanied these changes; a deviation from the LAS degrees core philosophy and values; a stagnation and a decrease in the quality of education of many existing disciplines; the prioritization of creating a productive workforce rather than a civically engaged, creative and virtuous individual; a potentially harmful impact on the tight knit social community; and the death of UCR as being a unique haven for people that want to contribute towards a better world and healthier earth.

What follows are the main points and elaboration of our concerns:

II. LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

A common denominator of our concerns is the lack of transparency between the management and the professors and students. Any possibility for a democratic dialogue was jeopardized by the management, who gagged our representatives, the AAC, through the signing of a non-disclosure document. The crux of the problem is that we feel as though UCR is undergoing a philosophical metamorphosis that we have not been informed about. It was asserted that we knew what we were expecting and getting into. However, we were expecting to enroll into a university that practiced what it preached, but we fear there is a growing discrepancy between the narrative and reality of the university. We understand that it is inevitable that a young institution such as UCR will eventually have to undergo some changes, however, we cannot be understanding of the fact that these changes were decided behind closed doors and under the agreement that our fellow student representatives, the AAC, were forced into confidentiality about a matter that clearly
impacts and concerns many lives. We believe the opportunity of engaging in a fruitful dialogue to discuss bountiful alternatives collectively to reach a democratic conclusion, was not enabled. In a sense, we feel as though we are victims of false advertisement, clients who have been promised one thing and that are receiving another. We say clients as that is how we increasingly feel. We feel as though we have been stripped from a qualitative humanity and reduced into quantitative numbers in the system whose purpose is to sustain and generate profit for the university. This, naturally, is in binary opposition to our hopes and expectations of having our humanity nurtured and empowered by the university. It is evident that our hopes and expectations of the university, which are justified by the university’s portrayed narrative, have not been met.

III. DIRECTIONALITY AND TRAJECTORY

It is apparent that there is a clear change in the directionality and trajectory that is desired, and being realized by the management. Subsequently, we believe that we are witnessing a metamorphosis which we think is characterized by a divergence from a LAS degree. This observation is based on the one hand on the perpetuation of the ongoing attrition and obliteration of a plethora of disciplines such as film, languages, education, music, art, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, and on the other hand, on the prioritisation of other disciplines. While all disciplines are valuable, we believe that the aforementioned subjects that are being sacrificed constitute a central pillar of LAS.

Prior to the changes announced on the 25th of April 2019, there already boiled a sentiment and hope among many of us that more emphasis must be placed on the existing departments. It is our belief that the disciplines disfavoured in the Reorientation Plan are also quintessential tools for addressing the contemporary humanitarian and planetary crises that pervade our home. To address these crises, the goal must be to create critical and imaginative students who think outside of the currents that have in part created these crises in the first place, and that engage civically in the world to help resolve these.

Thus, we fear that UCR, a place that we believed to be a unique place of learning that would nurture and empower students to become emancipated problem solvers, is now becoming like most other places of disciplining, whose goal is to produce productive and efficient workers fit to carry out instructions ordered from above. This is the creation of individuals who unquestioningly take orders and are indolent. The opposite is needed, we need people who engage in critical and reflexive dialogue and that are active and virtuous citizens in our world.
IV. ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

UCR prides itself in academic excellency, and indeed, when an institution is productive of it, this is something to celebrate. However, it appears that since the university’s inauguration, a focus on academic excellence as a central pillar has been crumbling, and we fear that there is no longer much of this pillar that remains to withstand the crashing down of UCR’s reputation as a place of academic excellence. UCR started with outstandingly accredited professors and heads of departments. Many full time and accredited professors have since been replaced by part time professors, and sometimes even by incompetent professors who we believe are not under sufficient externally sourced supervision in order to accurately assess their quality to ensure a status of academic excellence at UCR. Instead of addressing these issues, we believe more sacrifices to the quality of the education have been made. Increasing the quantity of departments does not necessarily mean an improvement in the quality, neither does it necessarily increase diversity. If the goal is to create critical students, having disciplines with merely one professor does not allow for this to happen. Rather than reducing the amount of professors, the objective should have been to increase the number of professors within existing departments, and especially within those departments that are less factual and more qualitative to ensure that students receive varying points of view.

Initially, the primary goal of UCR was never to simply fill the classes. Priority was rightly placed on ensuring that a diverse place of learning was created, in terms of both disciplines and points of view within those disciplines, and that classes encouraged dialogue between fellow peers and professors. Courses are now being cancelled because they cannot fill the class up with enough students. This is a shame as it reduces both the quality and quantity of courses and does not sufficiently consider that the small class sizes were one of the main reasons that drew us to UCR and that helps distinguish it from its competitors. Again, quantification takes priority and this has resulted in UCR advertising itself as a place where reject students are welcomed if their first choice did not admit them in order to fulfil a managerial objective, to fill up classrooms. Quantification can be detrimental to the quality of education. UCR, like many other universities, we fear has become more output oriented rather than outcome focussed. The analyses of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) conducted by the board of trustees focus on quantifiable data which fails in adequately representing the qualitative aspects. It is all about numbers, how many enrol, how many do masters, in which sectors do they secure careers, etc.

Unfortunately, it is precisely the qualitative aspects that we believe make UCR the beautiful and unique place that it is/ was. Furthermore, in the light of weakening standards, we students now feel as though the pressure to uphold a sta-
tus of academic excellence is increasingly placed on the weight of our shoulders. The decreasing input and control of academic excellence from the management, has resulted in a situation in which we feel as though we have to uphold the standards because, as many professors remind us, this is UCR. Indeed, while this is not our most pressing concern for this document, the pressure imposed on us to defend these accolades also contributes to a student body that is drowning in unhealthy amounts of stress which must be taken more seriously by the management.

V. TARGET AUDIENCE

The array of choices offered to us bears the potential of exposure to disciplines that we had not considered seriously, or even been aware of. Within these disciplines, which are not advertised as the strengths of UCRs liberal arts education, lie knowledges and ways of thinking and being that can potentially equip us with new lenses to make sense of our position in the complexity of this world. Thus, disinvesting in anthropology, sociology and philosophy limits the possibility to engage with critical ways of conceiving reality, and likewise, the disinvesting in music, film, theatre and other forms of expression limits creative ways of living. We have often felt that the broadness of course choices enabled ourselves to feel a deep sentiment of personal emancipation from merely transmissive means of receiving an education. The transformative teaching style of most professors of the aforementioned classes is priceless in a world that desperately needs people who know how to think and feel, rather than what to think. As curious young adults, it is quite challenging to take a drastic decision in orienting ourselves towards a specific area of study: what if UCR would advertise itself as an institution that helps students to navigate under the storm?

The abundance of possible academic trajectories can be overwhelming for a 20-year-old who might be unwilling to make a binding decision in focusing and committing to one direction only. We believe that, if the institution aimed at attracting students who do not feel totally convinced of what they want to do in their future, UCR would become a unique place for the orientation and nurturing of undecided and open minds. We find counterproductive, and even demeaning for the LAS classical model, the fact that UCR aims at recruiting rejected students from mainstream Dutch universities. Those responsible for advertising UCR should aim at recruiting dedicated students who might not have a clear idea of what to do in their future. Furthermore, UCRs advertising campaigns should also be more directed towards the pillars of LAS education.

Today’s world is characterized by an overwhelming and oversaturated amount of information and knowledges: why wouldn’t a university that aims at liberally orienting students have enough demand? We believe that if this would
become one of the central tenets of UCRs advertisement campaign, the institution could potentially become an internationally acclaimed centre not only for academic orientation, but also for humanitarian excellence.

VI. UCR AS A COMMUNITY

One of the hitherto strengths of UCR, and a point that is promoted by the management, is the tight knit community. However, we feel as though this community is also being compromised. On the one hand the community is compromised by the decision making process of the management itself, that is, the firing and making redundant of staff and the drastic changes regarding the education of the students without engaging in dialogue, and on the other hand, the consequences that will emerge out of these decisions. We feel as though the reduction of courses offered within certain disciplines will have profound impacts on the social life at UCR as they contribute to the organization of valuable events that benefit the overall community.

For example, some philosophy and sociology courses ascribe community service work that help students get outside of the notorious UCR bubble and to help them find a meaning outside of academics. By reducing the available courses or inadequately advertising them, less students will enrol with those interests which we believe will have a negative impact on the wellbeing of the community. Moreover, the disinvestment especially of the Arts and Humanities, we fear, will cause a reduction in the number of students with artistic and creative attitudes that will enroll in the institution, resulting in a drop of the quality and variety of the social events in our community.

VII. UCR AS AN EXAMPLE

UCR, we believe, has served during its years as an exemplary model in a world where education is not necessarily synonymous with learning. In fact, education is too often practiced as a disciplining. A LAS degree, as we have argued, should focus on nurturing and empowering students to be civically engaged and virtuous individuals. Sadly, most education systems do not pursue the same ideal. Instead, they are transforming into business-oriented institutions, increasingly focused on generating profits. UCR was an exception to this rule. It was an example of how education can, and should be carried out differently. It has come to represent, for us and for many past students, an oasis in today’s desert of imagination. It was a place that incentivised us to undergo a process of learning to unlearn in order to re-learn about the world; unlike many conventional universities, it enabled a process of constantly doubting our certainties. In this way, we think, it defeated the sense of hopelessness that results from thinking that there is no alternative. It pushed us to believe in our imagination, in our dreams, and in our hopes in order
to build a new and better world. It gave us new lenses through which we begun to deconstruct the old order and started to conceive alternatives. This, of course, is still an ongoing process that perhaps will never be concluded. However, none of this would have occurred if it wasnt for the teaching of those disciplines that are clearly being dismissed in the trajectory that UCR is undertaking.

With the new developments, this exemplary model is being destroyed by a short-sighted administration that believes that the only way to be successful in this world is to follow the mass and the money. On the contrary, what made UCR so special, and what attracted so many like-minded and passionate individuals, was exactly its uniqueness, its positioning as a niche in a huge and competitive market.

If values are foundational to a LAS degree, UCR which is supposed to be exemplary of it, acted in a manner that can be regarded as an inspiration of how not to act. The professors here have dedicated themselves fully to this institution and were treated as disposable objects and the students futures were dictated. In a degree grounded in democracy, we feel that the least we could expect from the management was to act democratically. Given the tight knit community of UCR, we would even expect to come to such major decisions together, to work out together through dialogue, by listening to one another, what the best course of action to take is.

If UCR is a place dedicated to going beyond conventional education, that is, to create students equipped to contribute to a better earth and world, its current actions and trajectory are not exemplary.

VIII. CONCLUSION

UCR appears to be balancing on a razorblade: will it follow the current trends by prioritizing the more technical and practical disciplines, or will it fulfill its potential to become a refuge for the intellectual critics and dreamers of the world? The changes imposed by the management to reiterate, were not democratic and silenced the thoughts and sentiments of the students and faculty. We believe that if the desired changes were communicated transparently, the management would have been met with justified rebellion and bountiful suggestions of alternatives. These changes have had a profound impact on us.

We feel robbed and deceived, upset and angry, we feel embarrassed and devoid of our dignity and pride, wanting to leave and not wanting to recommend UCR. We cannot accept UCRs trajectory of a structural metamorphosis as a done deal. It is still possible to (re)install foundational LAS values and philosophies into UCR. Many of us affected by these changes already shared the conviction that changes should occur. Albeit, we thought changes would do well to occur in the opposite direction, that is, to fund the existing and reinstall the previously discon-
tinued disciplines in order to cement UCR as a niche in the world of education. In consideration of today's humanitarian and planetarian crises, we need what UCR has hitherto promised to be: a university that can nurture and empower individuals with critical and imaginative thinking that enable and encourage them to swim against the currents in order to conceive of better alternatives that bring beauty, love, sustenance, and justice to our world. We are willing to give UCR the benefit of the doubt as we are aware of what it has given us in the past, and confident about what it can do in the future. We believe that UCR can learn from its mistakes. We remain hopeful of a future in which UCR comes to decisions democratically. We believe that UCR can reclaim its place on the podium of academic excellence, and ultimately, we hope that UCR realigns itself with the values and philosophy of what it proclaims to be a proud provider of: a LAS education. This request is not an either or, we embrace the Engineering department, but we simply refuse to betray the roots of both the university and the broader legacy of LAS education. The imperative for the augmentation of the core disciplines that are constitutive of the Liberal Arts and Sciences strikes us as more important than ever.

We feel that the scales have been tipped, and we demand the restoration of their equilibrium.