

Demands for a More Inclusive and Supportive Academic Environment at UCR

We, the undersigned members of the UCR community, come together to address significant concerns regarding our university. Over the years, a number of groups have taken action to call attention to these issues, such as 'Enriching Diversity at the Liberal Arts and Sciences - UCR Diversity report' in 2018 (Appendix A) and the Anti-racism collective at UCR list of demands in 2020 (Appendix B). We recognize that some efforts have been made to improve our university, however the desired changes have not been sufficiently implemented and some necessary improvements have been overlooked. As dedicated members of this community, we firmly believe in the power of collective action to effect meaningful transformation. Therefore, we present this open letter outlining our demands for a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive academic environment at UCR. Our demands encompass critical areas that require immediate attention and action. We seek reform in the following areas:

We have four key demands for UCR. Firstly, we request the adaptation of **attendance policies** and utilization of existing resources to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all students. Secondly, we urge the re-evaluation and **decolonization of the curriculum** to foster education that embraces diversity, critically questions privilege, and promotes justice. Thirdly, we call for the establishment of a more effective, accountable, and representative **Equality Diversity and Inclusion committee**. Lastly, we emphasize the need to enhance the accessibility and quality of **mental health services** for UCR students.

Attendance Policy

The Goal: To adapt attendance policies and the use of current resources to be more inclusive and accessible.

The current absence policies discriminate against people with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health issues and against those who menstruate. They also push students to overdo themselves to meet basic requirements despite this risking their physical and psychological well-being. Thus, the UCR attendance policy will be changed to be more lenient and accessible for all students in a non-discriminatory regulation.

- Absence policies will be terminated.
- A record can be kept on attendance to support students in staying on track and checking in on them to offer support; however, absences will not affect students' grades or will be involved in their stay at the University.
- All the classrooms are currently set up with equipment to record the classes; this equipment should enable students to access education even when unable to attend classes physically and continue their studies.

Re-evaluation and decolonization the current curriculum to be more diverse in general

The Goal: To educate while embracing diversity and critically question issues of privilege, and acting for justice.

Decolonization of the curriculum refers to the undoing of colonial practices, where different approaches are taught for students to become more aware, respectful, and sensitive to different cultures.

Furthermore, decolonization practices inherently involve addressing the dominant Western mindset that promotes practices of supremacy based on factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, among others. It also refers to the confrontation and the challenging of colonial practices that have influenced education. Moreover, it must reject a one-size-fits-all education approach to validate student experiences, foster their strengths, and educate holistically beyond the academic intellect. The essential part of decolonizing the curriculum is continual reflection, where the university reflects on the curriculum, power dynamics, structure, and any action undertaken on students' behalf.

There are various steps to be taken to decolonize an institution. They are briefly mentioned here; however, Appendix C provides a more thorough explanation for each.

- Teachers should be required to re-evaluate their curricula based on guidelines provided by the EDI. These guidelines should include, but not be limited to, the following:
 - ◆ Professors diversify each course reading list and recommend textbooks to be more inclusive, thus addressing issues of representation of those who have been made invisible.
 - ◆ Lessons include correct attribution of discoveries to their founders, who tend to be members of marginalized groups rather than the famous and falsely credited privileged individuals.
 - ◆ Professors teach about the "overarching white worldview" (Feagin), which has resulted from centuries of colonialism and imperialism, thus impacting the existing curriculum.
- The course of academic writing provides the perfect space to thematize issues concerning social injustice, as the course is mandatory for all students. The readings assigned will address issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and climate justice. Furthermore, students will be actively encouraged to write essays on issues like these and present them to the class.

Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) committee

The Goal: To establish a more effective, accountable, and representative EDI committee.

The EDI committee was established to advise, offer support, diversify the curriculum, improve the study environment, and stimulate the involvement of employees and students. However, these goals require more specificity, measurability, achievability, and timelines to provide a strong framework for the EDI committee to create meaningful change. This is due to disorganization, lack of personnel, and funding scarcity, thus, disappointing students, leading to the following demands.

- First, UCR will implement an election system for selecting EDI committee student representatives to ensure diverse representation and inclusive decision-making processes.
- Secondly, the committee will enhance institutional accountability by revealing more precise roles and mission statements. Additionally, providing regular updates on the progress and goals related to diversifying the curriculum will foster a sense of accountability and demonstrate UCR's commitment. Moreover, there will be an apparent effort to explore a less hierarchical structure through student collaboration. Involving students and staff in generating ideas and strategies to improve diversity and inclusion on campus will contribute to a more comprehensive and effective approach.
- Thirdly, the EDI committee will support professors in re-evaluating and decolonizing their curricula.
- Lastly, the committee will hold regular workshops on diversity and inclusion to provide the university community with practical tools, resources, and knowledge.

Partnership with Mental Health Services

The Goal: To increase the accessibility, and quality of mental health services for UCR students.

UCR must provide better mental health services to support its students, especially as the waiting lists for psychological care are too long (Inspectie Gezondheidszorg en Jeugd, Ministerie VWS). The mental health services at UCR are currently inadequate to support the student body's diverse needs. Based on student experiences, the current counseling team is insufficient and unequipped to deal with some issues. These, for example, include issues regarding race-based discrimination, sexual assault aftercare, (severe) eating disorders, or (severe) self-harm.

- The university will collaborate with UU for students to access the student psychologists of UU. Students seeking help from one of the psychologists pay 25€ for an intake interview. Consequently, they have five (online) sessions free of charge. Should it be necessary, the psychologist helps with referrals to mental health specialists outside the university.
- A direct point of contact to Emergis, the local mental health service, will be arranged. It is essential for students to easily be able to reach an English-speaking professional who is aware of the UCR international community and the issues they face.

We emphasize that these demands stem from our commitment to fostering a more inclusive and supportive academic environment at UCR. By addressing these concerns, we can create a transformative educational experience that respects diversity, challenges oppressive systems, and promotes every community member's well-being. We urge the administration, faculty, staff, and students to join forces in advocating for these necessary changes.

Works cited

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Enriching Diversity at the Liberal Arts and Sciences

UCR Diversity Report

Key Findings

A. Our college is international but limited in diversity.

- Students of different backgrounds, of different social and historical positionalities experience the university differently.
- Students who feel different from the norm, do not always feel comfortable at the university.
- While having a strong presence of international students, there is a dominant 'monoculture'.
- The monocultural character of the college functions as an impediment for plural forms of transformative learning.

B. Our college practises a low intensity rather than an active interdisciplinarity.

- The college has an interdisciplinary architecture coupled with low epistemic plurality.
- Regulations obstruct students from taking an autonomous and creative stance in their path through the college.
- The curriculum reproduces a canon that while interdisciplinary is not positioned nor epistemically diverse.
- The college has good diversity practices in teaching coupled with a lack of diversity awareness.

C. The achievement of equality needs the active recognition of difference. If equality is taken for granted, it leads to the marginalisation of those that are outside the normative/privileged position in society.

- There is a need for an awareness of ableism and the need to actively support people with certain impairments or disabilities.
- There is a need to institutionalise support for students with special learning needs.
- There is a lack of diversity literacy and awareness among students and staff often hidden under an assumption of egalitarianism.
- There is a lack of awareness of non-heteronormative gender identities.
- The classroom is often experienced as unsafe for students and teachers who are not male, heterosexual or from minoritized backgrounds.
- There is a need to address forms of reproduction of inequalities in the classroom, addressing particularly the exhibition of otherness and the entitlement of the normative positions.

Main Recommendations

A. Global Citizenship Education

- The college should contribute to the construction of an open and inclusive society.
- Recognizing the public function of higher education, the university should be a space that actively addresses social inequalities and discrimination.
- Policy decisions should aim at avoiding egalitarianism and embrace an awareness of difference.
- We recommend active interaction on issues of diversity with the other colleges in the Netherlands. UCR can become a leading actor in the field while learning from the experiences of others.

B. Diversity Awareness and Teaching

- The ways of teaching and learning should not only reproduce exclusion but actively participate in forms of inclusion.
- The orientation towards global citizenship and engaged LAS should be oriented towards diversity rich practices of teaching and learning.
- Teachers and staff should become aware that the classroom mirrors a society that is ordered along different axis of discrimination, the classroom is not a level field and the achievement of equality requires an active engagement with diversity and inclusion.
- Teacher training should be provided to enhance diversity literacy.
- Teacher training should include awareness of ableism.
- Teacher training should include awareness of gender and racial discrimination.
- Diversity literacy should be incorporated as a requirement to attain teaching qualifications.
- Diversity parameters should be included in APDRs so that it becomes a valued practice in college.
- Diversity parameters should be included in course evaluations.
- We recommend rethinking organisational structures of distributed authority promoting decentralisation and empowerment. In particular we recommend exploring the formation of teaching clusters consisting of self-organised faculty teams that would be directly responsible for all aspects of teaching, development of courses and accreditation.

C. Active Interdisciplinarity

- We suggest developing an 'All-UCR Course' in which all students from a cohort would meet each other and experience interdisciplinarity at work. The 7.5 ECTS course would involve key lectures by teachers from all departments and would showcase how the different fields of expertise at the college can be interconnected around crucial global topics.
- Regulations should be revised to allow for creative forms of interdisciplinarity.

D. Epistemic Diversity

- Stimulate the development of epistemically diverse courses.

- Position the knowledge taught. It should include authors and schools of thought with different positionalities so as to stimulate and enrich the epistemic diversity of the curriculum.
- Promote positioning the canon as a good practice of teaching.

E. Becoming Diverse and Hosting Diversity

- Stimulate diversity by including staff and students with Black Migrant and Refugee backgrounds or that come from other minoritized sectors of society.
- Dedicate staff to support students with special learning abilities.
- Prepare a campus sensitive and adapted to special needs.
- Include non-binary gender registration parameters to the college.
- Implement gender neutral toilets.
- Ensure that all facilities are accessible for students with limited mobility.
- Make employment procedures more diversity-informed.
- Increase student recruitment from minority backgrounds.
- Provide clear and easily accessible data on the composition of the college population.

F. Student Awareness

- Nourish student culture with diversity awareness. Included in the intro-week activities that stimulate diversity awareness and that instill the college values and commitment to educate engaged and inclusive global citizens.
- Rethink the English speaking campaign in a way that it works for inclusion and does not become hostile to minority languages.

Appendix B

The Anti-Racism Collective at UCR

List of Demands 1.1

1. Revise section 10.3, such that- the complaint does not need to be fielded through the Professor or individual the complaints is being made about. - there is a higher degree of anonymity for the individual filing the complaint.
2. Institute a section within the academic handbook which deals specifically with race and penal action for those who commit racist (micro)aggressions, both, within the faculty and student body.
3. Hire a qualified POC Student Psychologist
 - a. To accommodate all students in need of proper mental health counselling on campus, this is incredibly important. Neither the counsellor, nor the bureaucratic process of seeking help at UCR, are sufficient means to deal with the scala of mental health issues that students face.
 - b. This psychologist may work closely with the Diversity Committee to improve experience
4. Increase representation within the institution
 - a. Increase efforts to hire more staff of colour, in positions of both teaching and authority. Efforts may include diversifying outreach, and/or highlighting how embodied diversity is valued in the call for applicants.
 - i. Some courses may require extra attention to the positionality of the teacher depending on the content matter (i.e. courses such as Latin American Social Theory and Debate, or China and the Dynamics of Globalization; etc). Courses should not be ‘about them, but without them’, and should instead embody representation. Hiring teachers or encouraging inviting guest lecturers with embodied lived experiences should be explicitly valued and encouraged by the institution (e.g. through funding or altered hiring processes).
 - b. Increase work on representation in all facets of UCR life, including courses, student body, staff, faculty, counselling, and student life.
 - i. There must be attention paid to making UCR more attractive to POC students, staff members, faculty members, etc.
 - ii. Ensure that each track affords the opportunity for students to be taught by a number of professors.
 - iii. On the UCR website and on Intranet, there must be a section explicitly in regards to racism.
5. Establish a Diversity Committee (DC) at UCR. The DC’s roles include:
 - a. Hiring a POC diversity officer, a certified Ombudsman which will serve as the first point of contact for race-related issues
 - i. Hire a person of colour for the position of diversity officer. If legally constrained, make an active effort to attract applicants of colour for the position. At the minimum, the officer should have an adequate level of critical diversity literacy to accommodate all students on campus.
 - b. Handling complaints that are centred around racism
 - i. The handling of these complaints and the mechanisms through which penalization is organised must be as accessible, simple and lacking in bureaucracy.

- ii. Make steps and measures undertaken in the case of a discriminatory incident more transparent and professional; procedures should be made clear to students and staff (i.e. by way of a public policy statement).
 - iii. Hold professors and students with history of discrimination accountable through appropriate and effective measures, such as restorative justice, probation, or mandatory diversity literacy training, depending on the situation
- c. Creating a critical diversity literacy program which every staff member/faculty is mandated to complete.
 - i. Critical diversity literacy training should provide teachers with the critical analytical tools to examine operations of power which implicate social identities (including one's own) to create systems of inequality, resulting in manifestations of privilege, advantage, disadvantage, oppression. Besides racial literacy, this training must foster an intersectional understanding of other axes of oppression, such as gender, sexuality, caste, ability and class.
 - ii. To ensure critical training, we request the facilitators of the training sessions to be (co-)selected by the Diversity Committee.
 - iii. Critical diversity literacy training should be accommodative of our students' differing positionalities. Spaces, either within or external to the training sessions, should be created for marginalised students.
- d. Decolonizing the curriculum
 - i. A fully POC body (within the DC) that works on implementing critical diversity literacy at UCR
 - ii. Have an adequate decolonizing evaluation procedure per discipline/course. Critically evaluate courses on inclusivity of (marginalised) perspectives. Introduce postcolonial/decolonial perspectives and methods in Academic Core Courses.
 - iii. Have more courses specifically dedicated to exploring postcolonial and decolonial theory.
- e. Produce an understandable manual on how to react to racially charged acts which create a feeling of unsafety (this is manual must again be easy to enact)

Future considerations: Scholarship issue and intersectionality

Sources: Blackwell, D. M. (2010). Sidelines and separate spaces: making education anti-racist for students of colour. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(4), 473-494; Steyn, M. (2014). Critical diversity literacy: essentials for the twenty-first century. In *Routledge international handbook of diversity studies* (pp. 397-407). Routledge.

C

Further details on decolonizing the curriculum

Decolonisation refers to the process in which colonies become independent of their colonisers (Cambridge). After WW2 the gradual process of decolonization began, it was peaceful in some countries, while in others a more violent movement was necessary to attain full independence of colonies from their colonisers.

Ways to decolonise curriculums:

- I. Diversify the reading list and recommended textbooks - legitimate focus to reform.
 - A. This acclimates the students to the presence of a range of writers which include authors of colour and those who identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community.
 - B. Addresses issues of representation by recognising the contributions of those who have been made invisible by structural and institutionalised racism (Menon).
- II. However, diversifying the reading list is solely about developing a more inclusive curriculum, and does not actually challenge racism and engage explicitly with decolonisation. Attribute actual discoveries to the respective POC, for example, credit the Kerala School of Indian scholars for one of the founding principles of modern mathematics - calculus, rather than Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibnitz, who discovered it 250 years after the Indian mathematicians.
- III. Consideration of the term whiteness and how it affects the experiences of those who are not white. Learn about the "overarching white world view" (Feagin), which has resulted from centuries of colonialism and imperialism, thus impacting the knowledge of creation, curation and conveyance.
- IV. Professors acquire diversity training by the EDI and learn about how to navigate diversity (e.g., ethnicity, race, gender) in the classroom.