

Interim President David McClain
University of Hawai'i

February 14, 2006

Dear David,

Establishing a UARC at our public educational institution is plain wrong, ethically, socially, culturally, historically, morally wrong. U.S. Military presence has assured that the physical space of Hawai'i, its political processes, and now perhaps even its intellectual autonomy would be co-opted.

This is a legacy made up of institutional processes like the one we are witnessing unfold at our university with the UARC controversy. It's a process that can only be understood by recognizing that those (and I'm not saying you're one of them) attempting to turn our institution into a military appendage are deeply invested in finalizing the American colonial process here in the islands. It is not necessary to formalize it in this way, at our highest public education institution. Indoctrinating our youngest citizens and our community in this way by the compliance of the university and its leadership is a disservice to our islands and a myopic, one could say, disingenuous, soft-initiation ploy.

Give our young people the opportunity to think-tank a better future. Don't saddle them with the intellectual mind-set that the military enterprise is the answer to THEIR future, that compliance is essential, that our educational system, young people and teachers need to participate on the back end of the global military enterprise. There are universities and war colleges dedicated to such ends.

Patriotism, of course, is an inappropriate criterion for establishing a UARC at UH, though some administrators have argued for it on these nationalist terms.

Our university needs its intellectual autonomy. Like its professors and students, the institution needs to be able to take the right path, not the path of least resistance. Not the path greased by cold cash and calculated militarism.

I worked at the institute for Creative Technologies in Marina del Rey as a writer, consultant and project coordinator, so I know something about how an organization like this works. I handled task orders and think tank sessions with the military and its agents at DARPA, the CIA, West Point, the FBI, Homeland Security the Pentagon, the Defense Modeling and Simulation Organization (DMSO), etc.

There's a central difference between the business world and academia: in academia we work with and have a commitment to students, and we work with them in an open, engaged environment. A healthy, open environment is part of the learning experience. A UARC is an unsound and manipulative environment for students and our community.

Furthermore students will do what they think is cool, without necessarily understanding the ramifications of and overall objectives of a project, or mission. Indoctrination is not an appropriate solution to this ethical issue. Indoctrination suggests the need for some sort of religious, faith-based adherence to the endeavor, which in a heavily colonized and contested space like Hawai'i, is profoundly disturbing at best. It promotes uncertainty, moral ambiguity and an ideology of communal lethality and violence for our young as necessary public engagement. That should be an ethical, moral and professional choice reserved for after their public intellectual formation.

Last fall when the faculty senate overwhelmingly voted down the UARC proposal, one professor suggested that the UARC only affected research scientists. That those in other disciplines would be relatively untouched, and thus should not have a voice in whether UH becomes a military appendage or not. While I believe his statement was sincere, it was also quite naïve. Stakeholders include of course our community, our keiki and the generations yet to come.

A UARC would necessarily poach talent and labor from the arts, communications, media studies, languages, linguistics and other disciplines in order to promote, frame and rationalize the military endeavor, much less contribute to the hardwiring of various aspects of the netcentric military machine. In other words, a UARC would recruit and indoctrinate from across the disciplines, fundamentally altering the mission, trajectory and alchemy of our university.

The Academy for Creative Media (ACM) for example, that I helped establish, has already posted online its intent to participate in UARC missions. In 2004, the Chief Technology Officer of the ACM and I had meetings while I was still at ACM with a downtown firm that presented ACM with a proposal to collaborate on military training which we counseled was not appropriate for a student-based educational environment. It takes courage to stand up to such money-making propositions, or to reconfigure them more appropriately for students, and I fear such backbone is no longer present in the current regime. It is especially intimidating for some, I would argue when the companies making such propositions are tied to members of the UH Board of Regents or former Board of Regents, as this company is, or if the proposal comes from UH program donors.

Given the online promotion of ACM-UARC activity, I would suggest that what Hawai'i is getting with the ACM-UARC dyad is a case of bait-and-switch politics. Like the ACM, the UARC for some is about power, money and turning self-invested perception into historical reality. Here's the bait and switch: at exactly the same moment that UH students are encouraged to tell their own stories at ACM in an audio-visual medium, that transformational, story-telling potential is co-opted by recruiting these students to tell the military's story, to promote the global military agenda, and to further sediment the colonization of the local spirit and intellect here in the islands. Auwe!

This would be an irresponsible travesty as much for what is imposed on us and our community as what is eliminated, like free and independent thinking, the hallmark of a great public university. It is a form of "soft initiation", or coercion by association, and

not of fully formed professionals or workers choosing freely and independently some professional course of action, but of our youngest minds in a formative environment. This is shameful and unnecessary.

Should our public university become a militarized enclave, we will be asking our students and faculty to compromise themselves in order to work. Compromise because embracing the doctrine of military development requires a kind of religious zeal, a faith in the military solution as the ultimate solution.

The military mind you is about building the most effective killing machines possible. And at the point of the spear is an individual; and on the other side of the spear are families and individuals. Individuals pull the trigger, push the button, decide who gets killed and who doesn't, who gets bombed and who doesn't, and individuals are prone to making mistakes, miscalculations, self-invested decisions that don't necessarily reflect what is good, right, or pono.

From where a UARC sits, involvement with the military industrial complex can appear to be an antiseptic experience. It may seem innocent, even aesthetically beautiful as in original eyewitness accounts of atomic bomb testing in the Pacific and elsewhere, or the nighttime air-raids on Iraq or Pakistan. Almost like a video game where there are no real casualties or collateral damage. But opting for the military solution as THE solution is no game.

There is an alternative future for Hawai'i available besides the militaristic one proposed by UH administration. Let me diverge for a moment here. Look at who is pushing the UARC. I don't mean to insult anyone, but let me just say that from a kanaka maoli perspective the University of Hawai'i is made up largely of a culture of outside experts. Most of these people are good people. I know: I've had many of them as teachers and as colleagues. But there's an interesting predatory dynamic going on with outside experts wanting to turn UH into a military appendage and claiming, at least initially, that it is for overriding patriotic reasons.

A public university ideally should be about the search for truth, knowledge, peace and the wellbeing of our environment, our families and our neighbors around the world. There are dedicated military universities. I've worked with researchers, scientists and students from such universities, including West Point, the Naval Postgraduate School and the US Army War College. These colleges are dedicated to military science, training and doctrine.

Currently, our university has a different kind of forward-thinking, humanitarian mission. There is a passion behind this issue on both sides because the UARC proposal does fundamentally change the intellectual, social and spiritual alchemy of this university. It is a HUGE ideological shift, and it is not fair or healthy. Our university needs to have a different legacy and function in our global environment, in part because the vast majority of our people have a different aspiration for our university system and our island community.

Our goal is not to be reactionary, recalcitrant and defensive, but to be the piko, to be the center of what is good and right, to be pono, to be an example for others to emulate, to learn from, not to shy away from, shun and avoid, to despise and question, to fear and ridicule.

At a university it's not just faculty who do the teaching. Students, administrators and faculty teach each other through peer and colleague interaction, and the institution of the university itself has a pedagogic function; it teaches by its actions, inactions and public representations. It's ethical responsibility in other words goes beyond what process and procedure allows it to do, or get away with.

We need a free and open public university so that our young people can think tank a better future than what most of us lived through in the 20th century. What a terrible lesson it would be to my children and yours, to my students and yours, if a UARC were established here when it need not be. What would we be telling them about THEIR future, about this University's VISION, the leadership's VISION for THEIR future; what would we be prognosticating about their hopes for freedom, peace, independent thinking and fresh, vital problem-solving?

Institutionalizing the military at this university is not the answer. Please say no to UARC and help do something good for this community and the UH culture and brand.

Sincerely,

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