Reflections at 22 College Ave East

Or, the Making of a College

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—  
     Because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—  
     Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
     Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

* Martin Niemoller (1946)

[The following article is based on *anonymous* s*ources*, including professors and students at USP. We did not quote them to avoid straining their personal relations with NUSC admin]

Reflection is an important part of USP. We care so much about reflection that we make USR a non S/Uable painfest. Yet ironically, the new administration of NUSC has denied the USP community a chance at reflection. Pardon the Katy Perry, but we’ve been made to feel like “plastic bag[s] drifting in the wind,” to be discarded or used to hold trash at the new admin’s whim and desire. Now it’s our turn to reflect on how that’s happened.

Before I start: let me be clear. This is intended as a reflection on the *new* administration’s handling of NUS College. The old USP administration headed by Prof Kang has nothing to be ashamed of; on the contrary, I have newfound respect for how they treated students.

USP was denied the right to a proper farewell. It died a quiet death on 30th June, with the end of Prof Kang’s tenure. We did not get a chance to bid farewell to cherished professors such as Professor Donald Favareau. Or amazing staff such as Ihsan and Glenda (and who could run 2am badminton sessions in CTPH without them!). The posters in the lifts were removed without ceremony; and the wall-art in the lobby was removed too. There was no formal announcement of USP’s closure. We didn’t even have proper reflective discussions with USP students and alumni to analyze how USP was like as a programme, to discuss its strengths and weaknesses, or its scope for improvement[[1]](#footnote-1). In the face of such trifling disregard for the spirit of reflection, I wonder how superficial next semester’s USR will feel like for my classmates in Year 4.

On a sentimental level, USP students weren’t given a chance to mourn for, or grieve for USP. Several alumni and professors shared with me that they felt that the NUSC admin toed a line of “strategic ambiguity” when it came to defining NUSC’s culture. That ambiguity meant we didn’t even know how much to grieve for when the “merger” was first announced. If, after all, NUSC was going to be a simple renaming of USP, then we wouldn’t have much to grieve for, beyond the loss of the *ketupat logo*. If the NUSC admin were going to wipe out all posters from lifts, delete the wall-art in the Cinnamon lobby, prevent any vestiges of USP culture from ‘leaking’ to freshies, split up the USP students across multiple wings, cancel our IGs and make them start from scratch (something we found out only much later), then naturally USP deserves a befitting funeral for the things we’d lose.

There is however, a worthy attempt to mark a small-scale funeral or ‘cross-over’ from USP to NUSC, run by a few selfless and brave alumni. The problem is that this funeral is (i) not framed as a funeral per-se, and, more problematically, (ii) folded into the NUSC NOW! programme, which has been nothing but disrespectful of USP students. Let’s see how *that* went.

Since late last year, USP students, led by USC, planned out a Freshmen Orientation Programme (FOP), investing a significant amount of time and effort into it. Several students committed their whole summer for FOP. Then suddenly, out of the blue, the NUSC administration decided to hire an external “vendor” to run the “onboarding” program, and told the student facilitators that they were in effect, not needed. The rationale was that the admin wanted a “fresh start” void of the vestiges of USP culture. This left student facilitators in the lurch, and some scrambled to find internships for the summer instead. After a while, the admin realized that they needed *saikang* warriors to run the vendor’s designed program, and student facilitators had to scramble to make time *again.*

Nevertheless, already-stressed USP students have tried to infuse colour and fun to this corporate-designed affair, but there’s only so much that we can do in the face of a uncaring new administration. Ironically, as several students (and some freshies) tell me, instead of guaranteeing a fresh start, NOW! ended up replacing USP’s *home-grown culture* of fake freshies and wholesome fun with a *corporate culture* introduced by an event management company.

It’s time for NUSC admin to look at some upside-down reflections of their top-down style.

PS: I credit Prof Quek’s Making of a Nation for this article’s title, and in particular, her critique of *The Reflections at Bukit Chandu* as a hollow and unrealistic portrayal of the Malay community’s heritage. The fact that much like NUS College, Singapore is a land obsessed with sanitizing history, is purely a coincidence.

PPS: This article uses terms such as “orientation” and “freshmen” in lieu of “onboarding” and “first-year” students. I can see why some students might feel that the older words aren’t desirable. However, based on my experience at USP, the usage of the older words is justified because we did not (by and large) have a toxic hierarchy during orientation, and did not intend for words such as “freshmen” to be exclusionary. We shouldn’t parachute external contexts into USP (and now NUSC).

1. To say nothing of the chaos of the planning committees, as several members of the Planning Committee (both students and professors) pointed out to me. The Planning Committees had no public reflection and most discussion was behind doors. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)