My Semester at UCR

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Introduction

This is a story about going with the flow and lucky coincidences. The preparation for one's semester abroad is always a complicated matter. It requires you to plan ahead and arrange many matters before arrival. This undertaking gets really complicated when the world becomes so uncertain to the point you do not even know if you will be able to access a certain country in the next two weeks. I took my chances and decided to try to go on an exchange to Tec de Monterrey in Mexico. I dared to take the risk of possibly not being able to study on-site, hoping that the situation would become better in the next couple of months. Well… I was wrong. Due to COVID, the university decided to switch entirely to online learning which defeated the purpose of me traveling there. The moment I thought I had to cancel my exchange plans, there was still a glimmer of hope in the form of the UC Exchange program. I would not have guessed at that time that it would be one of the best academic and personal choices I had yet to experience.

City Middelburg (Netherlands) and University Buildings

 The first thing you notice when arriving in Middelburg is that it is a small city. The city nightlife might not be the richest and the service sector might close quite early. What makes up for that fact is the coziness and aesthetic of the city. When it comes to the university buildings, they are definitely up to par with nice classrooms with well integrated hybrid systems (on-site + online classes) for those that cannot attend physically due to illness or vulnerability. Unfortunately, the study spaces are only open until 23:00 which is a shame for night owls like me. Middelburg is also only ten kilometers away from the seaside allowing for beach visits anytime!

UCR Community

In the same way as ATLAS, UCR fosters a close-knit community. One of the most unusual things about this community is their student-run study space, nightclub and cafe situated in Common House Elliott; a building organized by students for students on a voluntary basis. It is a great place for socializing, studying and partying and a clever initiative which I think should be adapted into more universities. The UCR community is a lot more varied as it offers a wide range of courses from political science, gender studies, cognitive science, marine biology to computer science, physics and mathematics. This creates an opportunity to meet people outside of your own field of expertise, as well as beliefs and values, giving plenty of opportunities for personal growth. Furthermore, student associations constantly organize cool

events (regular or not) for other students such as (free) volleyball training, cooking workshops or themed party events.

Academics

As for academics, I took courses such as electronics, biodiversity and algorithms & data structures and most importantly robotics. The study material might be intense at times but, for the most part, not too complicated. The academic work is predominantly focused on individual work and grades which I am glad ATLAS puts less emphasis on. The deciding factor for why I chose to go to UCR was the offering of the aforementioned robotics course. When I was in high school, I would watch research videos on YouTube about simulated bipedal creatures learning how to walk forward across different types of obstacles. I remember vividly how interesting the video was to me which definitely partially contributed to my passion for robotics and engineering. Little did I know that the person supervising the PhD student responsible for that video was my professor of robotics at UCR! Furthermore, as the semester progressed, I found that this professor and I actually get along very well. At that moment the universe had thrown its dice, I ended up with an opportunity to do my senior project under his supervision which in result led me to extending my stay at UCR into my last semester. This is something I would never have expected before going on exchange.
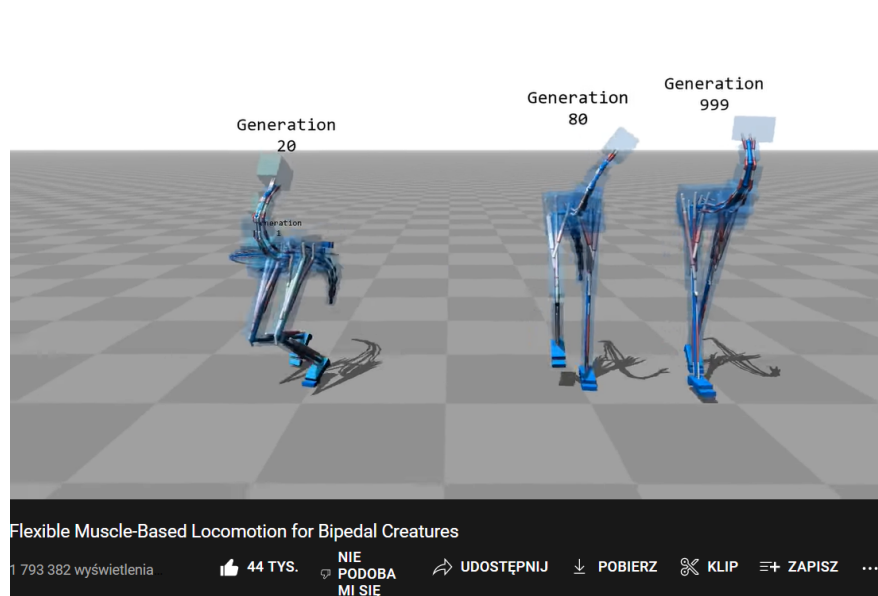
Accommodation and Finances

One of the things that UCR is great at is fostering the subcultures that are created across their campuses. It is due to the fact that students are not expected to move from their accommodation after the first year that allows them to set their roots into the places they live at. For those valuing personal space and (relative) peace, the Roggveenhof and Koestraat campuses are the way to go. These accommodations are single apartments equipped with their own kitchen and small bathroom. However, if you value closeness and want to have a "student family" for cooking, movie nights and house parties, the Bagijnhof campus (this is the one I ended up in) could be a good place for you. Lastly, for those that want to be at the center of the party life at UCR, Bachtensteene would be a great fit. As far as the prices go, the rooms stay relatively affordable with prices ranging from about 340-450 euros a month with all utilities included. Additionally, the housing company, Villex, together with the student-run Housing Affairs Council make the room arrangements seamless and stressless with an option to rent an already furnished room, this however comes at a relatively pricey cost.

Random shenanigans

After four semesters of studying at UTwente, most students manage to settle in and find their place within the institution and the city. This obviously gives us the much needed coziness and sense of security. However, it is often that we grow most in places where our status quo of life gets radically disturbed for the good and the bad. In order to illustrate what I mean by this, here

is a little list of great, funny, interesting, and, at times, unfortunate events that made this exchange truly MY exchange:

1. As mentioned before, I found a senior project supervisor (whose work I would know before even meeting him) that I get along with greatly and who managed to inspire me to pursue the field of robotics.
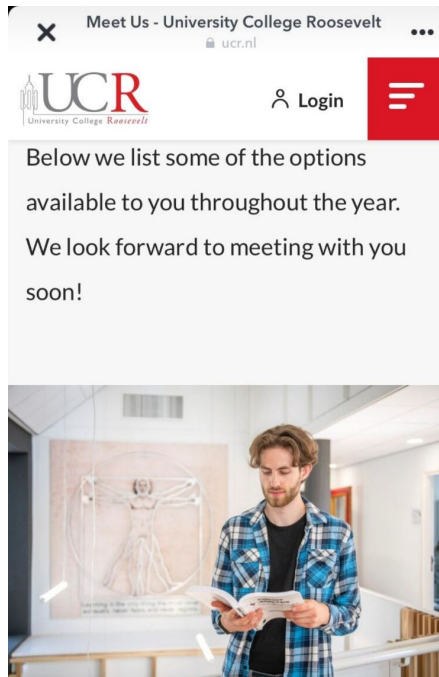

2. I dropped and broke my smartphone in the very first week of the exchange, having to rely on my newly met friends' help and which eventually gave me a push to learn how to fix smartphones by practicing on my broken one. It works again and is used by my mother now :)

3. I met (at that time) the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Ingrid van Engelshoven, during the opening of a new academic building for the engineering department at UCR which I was asked to attend as an engineering student.

4. I went to the seaside during the strong winds plowing through the Netherlands which allowed me to experience what it is like to have to barely cycle as the wind pushed me uphill.

5. I was invited to the opening of a joint research center in Middelburg. They asked a couple of other students and I to come to the roof of the building and celebrate the act of laying the highest part of the foundation of the building by symbolically handing in beers to the construction workers.

6. I was asked to pose for a picture for the UCR website which, given that I am not a UCR student, made it too funny to not agree. Fun fact, the book that I am holding is an electronics book written by UT professors :)

7. *Missing my amazing friends from UT and making new amazing friends at UCR.*