

Harrison Cullen BSE '15, The Cooper Union, Commencement Speech 2015

Four years ago, I was accepted to the Engineering School at Cooper Union by means of an Early Decision application. I applied Early Decision because of the promise of a full tuition scholarship. A free education was enough reason to commit to this school when, quite frankly, I didn't even know that much about it.

I mean, back then I knew what The Cooper Union was, but I definitely didn't know anything about "Cooper." Soon enough, I learned that your first year here is a somewhat violent recalibration of thought, interaction, and work ethic. That year is the crux of the rest of your education here, regardless of major.

However, during our very first semester, the version of Cooper that we applied to was thrown into jeopardy, as we discovered that the conditions we held to be permanent were actually anything but. We were told that our free educations were unsustainable and that we faced financial insolvency. For the first time in this school's history, tuition was put on the table.

So much has changed since then. Over four years we've seen a lock-in, an occupation, a lawsuit, and a New York State Attorney General Investigation. We've seen tuition become a reality at Cooper, along with the forced expansionist model that comes with it.

However, now that we're leaving, I am convinced that these circumstances have provided us all with an exceptionally radicalizing experience. For me, the main result of this experience has been the recognition that what is typically considered to be a "stable" environment does not produce originality or value. A state of static equilibrium catalyzes nothing. The Cooper Union, in all its political turmoil, is clearly not a stable environment.

However, this instability is not a weakness. On the contrary, our instability is an opportunity. Destabilization is a risk, and the familiarity of stability can never compare to the possibility that risk offers.

The urge for stability is a gravitational force. To combat this force is to combat comfortable stagnation at a point of zero potential. This combative effort is constant and conscious. Do not leave this place of historic destabilization and progress only to resubmit to old preconceptions. Do not depend on this world's feigned sense of stability as a structure of support. Challenge the size and form of these structures. Question the ways in which they function. Exempt no options from your realm of consideration. Entertain the irrational and idealistic before deferring to "best practices."

These past few years have probably been the most difficult of our entire lives. However, if nothing else, they have helped us to transform ourselves. This school has broken us and we have broken ourselves repeatedly over the years, and now we can take those shattered pieces and reassemble them into something stronger than before.

The first mention of tuition deepened an already existing rift among our schools. But now, after experiencing an education bracketed by the forceful rewriting of our own history, the only way that we can possibly regain control of our fractured narrative is through our unification.

I want you all to interact with each other. Engineering. Architecture. Art. But I don't want this interaction for the sake of those supposed precious intersections among our three fields (Three fields, by the way, that we often inaccurately perceive to be fundamentally different in the first place). Connecting for the sake of your work is great, but you should interact with each other for your own sakes. It is vital that we unify as a group of people so that we can take full advantage of our capacity to initiate change.

We must come together and tear open the void between ourselves before we can successfully allow others to join us. The history of this room is not derived simply from who spoke here, but from what they said and did in that moment. This school's legacy is one of academic, political, and social controversy! Be unapologetic in your efforts to fulfill that legacy.

This legacy means that the things we have done at Cooper cannot be taken home and put on a shelf. It is not enough to occasionally look back at these experiences when feeling nostalgic. We need to take these things outside of our school. We need to live them and multiply them.

The truth of the matter is: in the current climate of higher education, The Free Cooper Union is not an oasis. It is a model. We cannot let ourselves be the only people that received what it was able to offer. This school's mission should not be an exception to the morbid state of higher education. A supposed "meritocracy" is not the ideal. The ideal is the inability to stop fighting for more. That plaque on the Foundation Building clearly says the words "Free Education to All," and that "All" is not just us. It's not "All" that can torture themselves enough to get into and through Cooper Union. "All" means everyone.

Control of our own narrative begins with the embodiment of what that narrative must be. Envisioning our educational ideal will set the standard for what is worth doing, and help us to understand what we're sacrificing for before we decide what we must sacrifice in order to attain it.

We cannot recover this school's mission by simply throwing cash at our problems. I wouldn't ask this year's graduates to donate their money to Cooper. I'd ask them to donate their passion, their anger, and their belief that we can fix it and continue to make it better.

The students, faculty, staff, and alumni of this institution have been forced to take the ideological reins as of late, perhaps more than we're expected to. But, why, I ask, should it be any other way? We've clearly led our own school in the absence of actual leadership, and proven that we are the reason that our institution has become so great.

Why does our school need a president? Why not continue to lead ourselves? These questions need to be asked, and asked loudly. Otherwise, we may go on incorrectly assuming that the current organizational structure is the right one.

Ultimately, Cooper Union is a place of action. We are people of action. We must seek to define ourselves through this action, because no other method proves sufficient. Cooper Union is a way of existing in the world that preceded the school and preceded Peter Cooper himself. Being by means of Doing has built this school's foundation. We do not exist within a bubble, and it is of the utmost importance that we bring our action beyond our own walls. The Cooper Union is only one struggle of many.

Two years ago, while a group of students occupied the President's office seven floors above, Former Mayor Michael Bloomberg stood on this stage and told the graduating Class of 2013 that "there's nothing really free in life." I cannot even begin to tell you how strongly I contest this notion.

Even if I had paid tuition at Cooper, the education that I most value would not have been the Engineering education that I paid for. The education that I most value can't be accredited, can't result in a degree, and can't be charged tuition.

I have become part of a community dead-set on revolutionizing the way higher education functions in this country. This community has changed everything that I thought about everything, and that opportunity for change was free.

Four years ago, when we were first faced with our financial crisis, we were also faced with the opportunity to maintain our mission despite the odds. It was a chance to risk everything in order to preserve our institution's foundation, and to possibly come out the other end stronger than ever before. However, the path of tuition, of supposed stability, was taken instead.

Given recent events, it seems that this opportunity may arise once again. If so, it is our chance to reestablish ourselves as a bastion of self-governance and free education at a time when one is sorely needed. It is our chance to come together and reaffirm the words on that plaque outside, and to make them propagate to other colleges and universities. We need to take that chance, and let the world hear us scream "Free Education to All."

Thank you.

Full video (Speech is at 2:12:00): <http://original.livestream.com/thecooperunion1/video?clipId=pla_d8245232-57d1-4d43-b41a-b36d2850368c>

Podcast: <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/freetoall.mp3>>

YouTube video of excerpt followed by visuals with music: <http://youtu.be/Epb0UMJ_IK0>