

March 1, 2013 Trustee Forum Response: Open Letter to the Trustees

by Sean Cusack on Tuesday, March 5, 2013

To the Voting Members of the Board of Trustees of the Cooper Union:

As an active and interested alumnus, I was very interested to see what this forum would bring. I thought that this was a good step for transparency, not because it necessarily brought stakeholders closer in their beliefs, but because it presented everyone's views much more clearly. My greatest sadness is that this didn't occur a year ago and periodically since then, as I truly believe we would be in a better place today, given more time to iterate over our differences.

That being said, I listened intently to all that was spoken by all parties, and I believe that there are several instances of "what was said" not matching "what was meant", in all directions. After a year and a half of crisis management, it's very easy to assume that words spoken with one's immediate group mean the same thing to other groups. They do not, and working through them is necessary for rapport and trust to develop.

The stated goal of this open letter is to make all parties aware of differences in what was said versus what was heard. There's no telling where a disconnect comes from - misinterpretation, a failing intermediary, poor phrasing, asymmetrical power structure, or more personal or political explanations.

I then have a couple personal items to add, that I would have brought to the microphone if I had the opportunity.

I have done my best to leave personal judgements about individuals or groups out of this. I leave such endeavors as an exercise for the reader. This is my honest best attempt at a dispassionate analysis of sources of misconceptions, and sticking to specific grievances and facts, not personality judgments.

Executive Summary:

- I. "Live within our means" does not mean reducing student count**
- II. Please don't discount union cooperation**
- III. Use of "the faculty say" needs to be curtailed in public pronouncements**
- IV. The faculty do not support breaking up the schools - the petition**
- V. "Responsibility without agency is not sustainable"**
- VI. Alumni are not singularly culpable for the financial condition of the school**
- VII. Trustees are ultimately responsible for the financial condition of the school**
- VIII. Trustee meeting access for faculty and students**
- IX. Trustee fundraising could be more visible**
- X. Sunset on tuition**
- XI. Tuition-conditional bonds, push our deadline out to 2027**
- XII. A hope for the future**

I. Living within our means

Several times during the evening, the concept was brought up. Each time, the trustees responded with "reducing student count won't cut costs".

The disconnect:

The community said: "We must try to live within our means"

What the trustees heard: "We must reduce the size of the student population as a cost-cutting measure"

How the trustees responded: "Cutting student number won't reduce costs"

What the community heard: "Trustees are dodging the real question"

What needs to be understood is that the "living within our means" concept refers to the fact that we were much closer to "in the black" in year 2000. Since then, several things have changed. 1. Administrative overhead has nearly tripled, including our president making triple the compensation since 2000. 2. Benefits costs have tripled. 3. The economy and our endowment lost value in the market. 4. The NAB was built without sufficient capital funding acquired first. Now, there's not much that can be done about 3 & 4 right now. However, both administrative increases and benefits are adjustable.

When the community refers to "living within our means", they are talking about how other colleges, top heavy and dependent on ever-increasing tuition, are littering the media with publicly damning, failed financial models these past years. The community is talking about taking a path that does not tread already-known failed ground.

We, the students, alumni, and faculty of Cooper, are a pretty creative lot. Finding out-of-the-box solutions to problems is our life and our love. You talk of restructuring, so let's remove the barriers of "changes that do not affect the hierarchy of the administration" and really get down to the nuts and bolts of a dynamic, cross-school solution that better utilizes overlapping resources and challenges what it means to teach and to learn.

Any information source that might be summarizing "living within our means" merely as "cut students" may be preventing you from doing your jobs.

II. Don't discount the unions

It's important to note that, in previous discussions, as soon as the topic reaches this point, someone says "the unions will never negotiate a reduction in any way" and the conversation is immediately shut down. Please take this to the next step, there is room for negotiation here, as long as the austerity is not singularly on the backs of the teaching staff. Speaking for myself, not as a union representative, I would be willing to take a cut if it really saved the school from tuition, and as long as twice as much were removed from non-faculty costs as well.

Any information source that declares the the unions are not prepared to negotiate difficult terms may be preventing you from doing your jobs.

III. Use of "The Faculty Say"

It's one thing to report on what a faculty body votes on, and some leeway is always in play when trying to summarize a complex set of views across a diverse collection of people. However, this phrase has become extremely popular of late, and has not been accurate in the process. It is demonstrably not the case to state "the faculty support tuition." The Art Faculty faculty refused to vote on it. The Architecture Faculty voted on it but refused to support it. And the Engineering Full-Time Faculty essentially endorsed non-undergrad-tuition income by a bare majority and permanently tabled undergrad tuition. In addition, the Humanities Faculty were never asked. And the Part-Time Engineering Faculty were also never engaged, even though we comprise the majority of the instructors in the Engineering School.

The disconnect:

What is said by Faculty: A mixture of many views, with a representative official vote that does not support any tuition, except in one case with one subset of the faculty

What is heard by Trustees: Faculty are behind tuition

What is said by Trustees: "The Faculty support tuition"

What is heard by Faculty: Why are they misconstruing our position? Speculation ensues.

Any information source summarizing "the faculty position" as "supports tuition" may be preventing you from doing your jobs.

Update: as we all know, at the 11th hour, the Art faculty voted to adopt a program. Given their actions and words up to this point, and the last-minute and silent nature of this, the action itself stands out. Take from this what all will, but be aware of what the community, engaged and knowing as it is, will take from continued pronouncements about this action on their part.

IV. The Faculties are United

Some time was spent in the forum discussing whether one school, Art, can be continued if they can't make up their apparent financial shortfall. This is not the way that the faculty see this. I know I just finished a criticism of misusing "the faculty say", but in this case, there is backing. Please see

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.141842379317415.1073741825.113048392196814&type=1> for details.

By the end of this week, this should constitute a majority of the full-time faculty in all four schools, and a representative group of part-time faculty in all four schools. Even just between after-hours Thursday and the forum on Friday (a light day for faculty availability on campus), already approximately 65 signatures have been collected.

All the four schools must continue into the future, placing fractures between the schools should not be considered an option. It may be the more challenging path, but the majority of the faculty do not support breaking up the schools.

We need more faculty-trustee direct discussions. The Art Faculty meeting Mark Epstein, Francois deMenil, and Tom Driscoll was a very good start. Let's continue that with more faculties, students, and alumni.

V. "Responsibility without agency is not sustainable"

This was the quote by Architecture student Bob Estrin, the second-to-last questioner at the forum, and it is immensely sublime. So much so that I think it may have been overlooked. However, it cuts directly to several different major issues. Foremost is the decision to hand the deficit to the individual schools to resolve individually.

In order to delegate a project, one must clearly provide two separate things. The scope of the request. And the ability to bring it to fruition. This is a source of disconnect. The schools were handed the responsibility to balance a budget, but without any power to balance the budget. If they had (for example) each been handed 1/3 of the administrative budget as well, and were told to balance their needs and their capabilities, then that would be empowering them to solve the issue. Also, it was not considered that working together as a collection of Faculties might be more efficient, rather than causing duplicate work to be done.

So when the board makes a statement about how they included the faculty in the decision-making process, this is only half-true. Just true enough to seem fine to say, but it's taken completely differently than intended, because of the frustrating other necessary half of the truth.

VI. Alumni are not singularly culpable for the financial condition of the school

I'm glad that this was said. Please keep saying this, and not in the same breath as "but you have to give more". The fact is that when you are speaking to a Great Hall full of interested parties, those aren't the people that need reminding. Even a simple rephrasing of "please help us reach out to less engaged alumni" instead, would do wonders.

VII. Trustees are ultimately responsible for the financial condition of the school

I'm also glad this was said, keep saying it. This has been a bone of contention since last year.

VIII. Trustee meeting access for faculty and students

This would be huge. As a first step, not even as voting members, just part of the deliberations on things. I encourage you to consider this strongly and soon.

IX. Trustee fundraising could be more visible

You spoke about not being Andrew Carnegie, but we ask that you at least try to be Dale Carnegie. We need trustees to be visible and engaged, both with us and with the community. Part of your job is to fundraise for the school, and it would do wonders to be more public about your efforts to this end, and to engage with various groups. Please come and make Phoneathon calls with us. Please come to the Entrepreneurship Society events to sponsor Cooper startups that will bring both notoriety and funding back to the school through successful alumni. And please make public calls for involvement in your own fundraising ideas, so that the community can join in as well.

X. Sunset on tuition

This is my probably controversial, personal plead. This in no way demonstrates my personal suggestion that tuition is the way forward for the school. But if you decide to do it anyways, please put a 10-year sunset clause on it and publicly declare your support and time over the next 10 years in helping to develop programs that put us far enough into the black so as to actually revoke tuition at that time. Otherwise, we will be forever beholden to the same losing premise of ever-rising tuition that curses every other higher-education institution in the country. You know very well that once the income becomes part of the revenue stream, it will be extremely difficult to reverse, without deliberate and specific preparation.

XI. Tuition-conditional bonds

Finally, last but existentially important: TC Westcott's own numbers demonstrate that, if Development does its job of bringing in \$10m/year, and with no other changes, no new programs, that the unrestricted endowment runs out in 2015. However, if you follow the line, it dips just barely below zero, and holds there, above -\$50m, until 2027. That means that if we had \$50m more right this moment, that we'd move our comeuppance from 2015 to 2027. That gives us 15 years to work on long term solutions, not 2. Nearly anything we can possibly manage should be done to try to reach for this.

One possibility is floating bonds for the school. And one idea a few have discussed would be a bond that pays differently, depending on if tuition is charged during it's lifetime. An example might be a 30-year 3% zero-interest bond, that pays 6% instead, if tuition is charged. That way, people can purchase, knowing that they're only donating to a tuition-less Cooper Union, since 3% would be a safe amount that they would have made anyways, in the interim.

XII. A hope for the future

In all, I'm glad that this forum occurred. I think it is at least a step in the right direction, specifically because the beliefs presented by each party clarified their positions and understandings, even if those understandings were not symmetrical - which was the goal of my letter here to iterate. This is the first step towards communication and eventually

transparency. The journey of a thousand miles began with one footstep on March 1, 2013. Please schedule another forum soon, and more public discussions with stakeholder groups, so we can take a second step.

Sean Cusack, BSE'98

Alumni Council 2015

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Engineering Representative to the Part-Time Faculty Union

Friend of Cooper Union

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Adjunct salary to Cooper for nearly his entire tenure

Generally Overly-committed Cooperite