

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI & PIONEER

Envisioning Austerity

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Abstract

The Cooper Union will survive as an institution devoted to philanthropy and austerity. An understanding of austerity must pervade every department and function of the institution. The author moves the discussion away from reinvention to reinforcing the mission of the college, with concrete suggestions for layoffs and changes in programs.

Movements bring ideas and insights into public discourse and force an examination of cultural, economic, and social structures in light of new values and goals. The peace movement, fueled by the draft, expanded to a consideration of the entire military-industrial complex. The civil rights movement, which led to the elimination of Jim Crow laws, also spawned attention to women's and gay rights. These movements don't die, they evolve and shift and change emphasis. The whole earth movement became the green movement and, with global warming, fixed attention on sustainability and carbon footprint. It became possible to evaluate a multitude of activities and objects from these new perspectives.

The Cooper Union has faced crises before, and has always relied on philanthropy and austerity to survive. At the millenium, The Cooper Union lost sight of those measures and put its faith in real estate development, hedge fund investments, and name recognition, both for itself and its donors. This came to a peak when the crash of 2008 was followed by the 150th anniversary of the college, a year long celebration that included the opening of the New Academic Building.

Although lip service was paid to austerity, any examination of the post-2008 budgets reveals an uncontrolled spending spree, outpacing both inflation (as defined by the consumer price index) and the rising cost of higher education (as defined by the higher education price index). With real estate exhausted and investment portfolios yielding low returns, The Cooper Union turned to development. Later, a new president suggested that The Cooper Union grow and "reinvent" itself.

Those devoted to saving The Cooper Union have insisted that, instead, the college **reinforce** its mission, and return to its reliance on philanthropy and austerity. The uniqueness of Cooper's mission has always translated into a uniqueness of the Cooper college experience, a uniqueness the recent administrations have apparently lost sight of. By shifting the discussion to revenue and reinvention, the new president has diverted attention not just from expense reduction, but from Cooper as an institution devoted to austerity throughout its departments and divisions. The financial goals set before the Revenue Task Force ask for an additional \$20 million a year in 2018 for a "sustainable financial model," despite the fact that The Cooper Union will already realize an additional \$20 million a year by then (a \$24 million rise in Chrysler Building PILOT, \$2 million in PILOT for 51 Astor Place, less \$6 million to start paying down principal on the MetLife loan). With 2012 expenditures of \$60 million, why would the Board of Trustees agree that the new president needs an additional \$40 million in 2018?

What follows, then, is a consideration of The Cooper Union from the viewpoint of austerity. What activities serve the mission of the college? Which are extraneous – common at other colleges, perhaps, but not at a college which chooses to emphasize austerity institution-wide, while remaining "equal to the best"?

The core mission of the college is to provide undergraduate programs in art, architecture, and engineering. Those programs are to prepare talented students to make enlightened contributions to society. The mission statement makes no mention of graduate programs, nor does it say that The Cooper Union itself must make enlightened contributions to society (although the mission statement does require that Cooper offer public programs, which will be discussed later). From an austerity viewpoint, sustaining graduate programs makes no sense. The graduate programs are not accredited. Graduate courses must be taught by professors with doctoral diplomas. The number of course offerings must increase and the number of students in each course is less. Facilities must be maintained to support research. Yes, this may be offset by research grants and patent revenue, but this is typically played out in an environment of stipends and teaching assistants in doctoral programs.

At the breakout sessions held by the Friends of Cooper Union, it was suggested that The Cooper Union might reverse the model – graduate students would have to pay full-tuition for their degrees. Coincidentally, the Revenue Task Force came up with the same idea. At least this is evidence of true austerity thinking at play.

Another diversion from austerity thinking is the student desire for more laboratory and project-based course work. In the art and architecture schools, this could be seen as a desire for less theory. From an austerity viewpoint, more “practical” courses and less theoretical courses are more expensive. From a career viewpoint, more emphasis on practice is short-sighted. It might – and that’s a very big might – prepare a graduate for his or her first job, but the knowledge gained will not sustain over an entire career. Undergraduates don’t specialize, and many undergraduates go on to careers outside of art, architecture, and engineering. Undergraduate courses need to be more foundational, more theoretical, and provide overviews, not specialize. In the mission statement, this could be interpreted as the “enlightened” contributions that students will be prepared to make.

With the emphasis moved from practice to theory, this allows for some reexamination of the technical support services that The Cooper Union provides to its students. Within the engineering school, how many technicians need to be employed? With the art school, how many shop personnel are needed? What would an austerity computer budget look like?

This extends not only down to the bottom, but to the top as well. In an austerity environment, what are the functions of highly paid deans? The faculty union has suggested replacing the deans with rotating appointments from amongst the faculty.

The department of humanities is supplemented by ten writing scholars. They provide assistance to students, faculty, and staff; in an austerity environment, should the number be reduced? The Cooper Union also has a library and employs curators for exhibitions in its galleries. The library provides archive functions and access to resources; of the latter, many are available through partnerships with other colleges and through the excellent research libraries in New York City. Mounting exhibitions is both a service to the students and faculty as well as to the public; in an austerity environment, cuts can be made. The point isn’t that these positions and functions should be eliminated completely, but that reductions, however painful, must be made.

In addition to exhibitions, The Cooper Union has always had a history of providing public programs. What has changed is a shift from the Foundation Building to the NAB, along with the assumption that the NAB itself is a public landmark requiring professional protection. Although it might be considered more efficient to farm security out to an outside company – needs can be scaled up and down with less effort – the presumption that large-scale protection is needed is excessive and, in fact, a transient workforce is inherently less safe than a regular staff.

As to the public programs themselves, it is already becoming clear that some reduction may be required. No matter what, the availability of the Great Hall for socially progressive meetings and lectures must be maintained.

Recent administrations have ripped fundraising from the alumni association and staff and invested, instead, in a large professional staff divorced from any appreciation for the uniqueness of The Cooper Union. The accountability and cost-effectiveness of this large staff is being called into question. This staff considered an austerity position to be anathema. Evidence is the profusion of over-the-top parties related to the 150th anniversary celebration. This kind of thinking – that events and naming opportunities were more important than the institution itself – fell apart when, just two years later, The Cooper Union was considered the evil landlord of the St Marks Bookshop in the public eye. The Cooper Union needs quiet, private philanthropists devoted to its mission, not publicity-seekers.

This inherent conflict between publicizing austerity as essential to the college's existence and hiding it from the public eye in the belief that it will scare away donors and potential students has extended to the college's public relations staff and the Cooper website. Instead of public relations, the college has been devoted to censorship and irrelevant publicity about alumni. It is evident that the alumni website can be effectively run by the alumni staff, whereas the public relations staff and production of *At Cooper Union* can be replaced by social media. The rebranding of The Cooper Union has proven to be a wasteful boondoggle, even forcing alumni to trade in their alumni association ID cards for new ones for no apparent reason.

Finally, the financial staff itself has proven to be unable to be self-policing. As the administrative budget has bloated, the administrative staff devoted to handling that budget has bloated. Severe cuts in staff will also lead to concurrent savings in leased space for that staff.

There is no reason that The Cooper Union should have a president paid in the top 10 of presidents in the country. If the president and vice presidents will not accept deep cuts in staff and in pay, then let them resign and be replaced with staff more devoted to austerity and doing more with less.

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