

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI PIONEER

Counter-Narratives to the Administration Narrative Part II (rev 1)

by Barry Drogin, EE '83

Abstract

The narratives fed to the Cooper Union community in November 2011 have proved to be all lies. Four years later, new narratives have emerged, some persisting, some cooked up at the end by an administration trying to sell a non-Cooper audience on their legitimacy and value. What follows are a dozen administration narratives, all false. Media, beware.

Administration Narrative: There was no plan to charge tuition.

Counter-Narrative: This was a direct quote from Mark Epstein, Chair of the Board of Trustees, concerning the hiring of Dr. Jamshed Bharucha, but it is countered by overwhelming evidence. In a private conversation recorded by an alumnus, Mark Epstein also stated that his only regret was that he didn't start charging tuition sooner. In a long interview with Education Update after announcement of his hiring, the reporter tried to coax a commitment to the full-tuition scholarship policy from Dr. Bharucha but concluded that, to Dr. Bharucha, the policy was not the "main reason" students came to Cooper. And, in hindsight, we can see that in the "reinvention strategy" proposed by Dr. Bharucha, one day after vowing to the New York Times that the scholarship policy of the college would not change, Dr. Bharucha himself proposed a change in the scholarship policy. There is much more evidence, including the glee over a presentation to the Board that Peter Cooper may not have said the words "as free as air and water" (ignoring that this was a felicitous paraphrase of something Peter Cooper most definitely said, "open and free to all."). This is coupled with statements about how discussions about tuition had "never left the board room." It would be hard to find any evidence that there was no plan to charge tuition, declarations to the contrary.

Administration Narrative: Jamshed Bharucha "discovered" that the deficit was worse than believed and revealed the information to the Board, the Alumni Council, and the rest of the Cooper Union Community and media.

Counter-Narrative: It is true that the \$10M debt service on the \$175M loan was moved over, slowly, to the operating budget, so that the operating expenses of the college grow gradually, by \$5M per year, from fiscal year 2006 to fiscal year 2011. In fiscal years 2006, 2007, and 2008, this didn't seem like such a big deal, because the hedge funds were imputing revenue to the operating budget to offset it. But moving the debt service from the cash flow page over to the operating expenses page (it was distributed amongst the categories of "instruction," "academic support," and "management and general" in the Consolidated Financial Statements) could not have been a surprise to the Board – or, at least, not to the Board's Executive Committee. If it had been – if, under orders of President George Campbell, TC Westcott had hidden the size of the deficit from the Board – the Board would have had her fired. Instead, she was enlisted by Dr. Bharucha in preparing PowerPoints and graphics to prove to the Cooper Union community that charging tuition was a necessity. And then, when the models she was using were about to be revealed to contain ridiculous projections that did not

support the charging of tuition, she was fired, and consultants were hired to mislead the Working Group – and the Board – even further. But by that time, charging tuition had changed from a financial discussion to a philosophical and legal discussion, and the “battle of the spreadsheets” was ignored.

Administration Narrative: The quality of the incoming freshmen of September 2014 was “as strong as ever.”

Counter-Narrative: Loathe as it is to impugn any single student, taken as a whole, the students admitted in September 2014 were not up to prior standards, with much lower high school scores and failing first year classes. Such a narrative makes parents feel good, but has no basis in fact.

Administration Narrative: The increase in Pell grants to the incoming freshmen of September 2014 was “significant.”

Counter-Narrative: 373 students were admitted in September 2014. According to Dr. Bharucha, 15% to 16% of prior classes included students who were “Pell eligible.” That’s 60 students. In 2014, that rose to 22.4%, or 83.5 students (one wonders about that decimal place, in the percentage and in the number of students). That’s less than two dozen more students out of 373. That’s “significant”? It is the inverse that is significant: some 290 out of the 373 students are NOT “Pell eligible.” As many in the minority community have known for years, The Cooper Union has become a college for the middle class.

Administration Narrative: Prior to 1902, The Cooper Union charged tuition.

Counter-Narrative: This is sometimes hidden in some news stories as “for over a century.” It is not to be minimized, as it constitutes the basis for the lawsuit that The Cooper Union is losing. Journalists have, unknowingly, twisted and turned this lie so often that it has come to imply that in 1901, The Cooper Union charged tuition. The facts, backed by Cooper historians and refuted over and over (even enshrined in a “Free Since 1859” campaign), are that the only students to ever pay for a Cooper education were part-time “amateurs” (“auditors” in current parlance), that these amateurs were not seeking medals, certificates, or diplomas, and the fees that they were paying for a single class could not be interpreted as “tuition.” That the amateurs can only be traced to 1887, that the engineering day school wasn’t founded until 1901-1902, none of these facts have countered the simplicity of the soundbite and Internet meme, which even led some students to stage a protest in 2012 with “110 Years Free” balloons. Since its founding over 150 years ago, The Cooper Union had provided free education to ALL of its full-time and part-time degree students, day and night. This was first chipped away at with the Continuing Education Certificate programs, the Master of Architecture degree program, and, finally, all of the undergraduate programs starting with those enrolled in September 2014 and now a non-thesis Masters of Engineering program.

Administration Narrative: “Cohort pedagogy” exists.

Counter-Narrative: Pedagogy has to do with the theory, method, and practice of education. Teachers teach. Yes, in “The King and I,” Oscar Hammerstein II coined the phrase, “if you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught” (calling it “a very ancient saying” to boot). It is also true that, in contrast to reading a text book or taking a course on-line, all real colleges provide opportunities for students to study together, work on projects together, and learn from each other. But when the new Chief Academic Officer of The Cooper Union (now the former Chief Academic Officer of The Cooper Union) starts bragging about a new form of “cohort pedagogy,” it can only have two possible meanings: hiring less teachers (increased class size) and encouraging cheating (pairing weak students with strong students and giving the pair a single grade awarded to both). In

other words, a serious diminution of academic standards and excellence (in the name, of course, of academic excellence).

Administration Narrative: Only 20% of alumni donate to the college.

Counter-Narrative: In the entire country, there has been a persistent downward trend in the percentages of alumni who donate money to their alma maters. This inevitable trend is due to improvements in database management by college development offices, and is quite well known (well, within development offices, anyway). There was also a precipitous drop in college donations, both in amounts and in number of donors, due to the economic crash of 2008. This is also quite well known. And then there are the trends unique to Cooper: the persistent advertising for the Building Fund (and the rejection of all advertising for the annual fund), the stress on “big money donors” (“Urban Visionaries,” in particular, as a spectacular fundraiser, while the Founder’s Day Dinner Dance lost money every year), and then the inevitable drop in alumni donations fueled by Mark Epstein’s “Blame the Alumni” antagonism campaign and the refusal by Dr. Bharucha to make any structural financial changes in administrative operations (instead, he hired more consultants than any former president, wasting millions). But, like “prior to 1902,” it also contains a lie. The implication is that, every year, it is the same 20% giving, on a regular basis. A detailed analysis of individual donor rates from 1980 to 2008 showed that there is no such thing as a “regular contributor,” that donations to The Cooper Union are fairly uniformly distributed from never to always, that the average donor donates 54% of the time, or every other year. The only valid generalizations? Young alumni have low donation rates (their parents donate instead), some Cooper Couples are undercounted, and older alumni (especially after their 25th reunion, and even more so after retirement) have much higher donation rates. But the statistic is more accurate when reversed: only 20% of alumni have never donated to the college. And since that doesn’t include alumni who have donated their time as volunteers and as teachers, that percentage may be much lower.

Administration Narrative: The unions at The Cooper Union would make the Working Group Plan unfeasible.

Counter-Narrative: The Cooper Union has three unions, a full-time faculty union, a part-time faculty union, and a staff union. So, without the facts, it would be easy to claim that the Working Group Plan proposals required union approval to be implemented, and that that could not be guaranteed. Surely, some of the Working Group Plan proposals do require union approval. In fact, the Working Group Report is explicit about which proposals require union approval and which don’t. The Working Group also built a “release valve” into its Plan, a proposal to increase the Student Fee in lieu of reducing the full-tuition scholarship. By coincidence, it turns out that the Student Fee proposal offsets, exactly, all components of the Working Group Plan that require union approval. Blaming the unions is a red herring.

Administration Narrative: The Attorney General probe is an effort by Jeff Gural to help Eric Schneiderman’s ambitions as a candidate in the democratic party.

Counter-Narrative: No doubt about it, Jeff Gural is a member of the Real Estate Board of New York and has real power in the New York real estate scene and market. He also has found a pet cause: free education for the lower class. But the Attorney General got involved in The Cooper Union case because the Committee to Save Cooper Union approached them, not through some back room deal with Jeff Gural. This accusation came from two trustees who refused to let their names be used.

Administration Narrative: The Board of Trustees offered to not renew the President’s contract to stop the Attorney General probe.

Counter-Narrative: That is what Daniel Libeskind told *The Wall Street Journal*. It is also completely incorrect. Although it was a secret at the time, another trustee, Malcolm King, told the student newspaper what was really going on: the Attorney General's office was acting as a mediator between the Committee to Save Cooper Union's lawyers and the Board of Trustee's lawyers. One of the first demands of the Committee was the non-renewal of Dr. Bharucha's contract.

Administration Narrative: The Cooper Union has no more assets to sell.

Counter-Narrative: Actually, it does. Selling the Chrysler Building is a darling of the media – and it returns a lot of the payments in lieu of taxes to the New York City coffers – but it is a bad idea. The Working Group Report recommended selling the Residence Hall, and the student representative to the Board of Trustees told the Board directly that, given a choice between a dorm and the full-tuition scholarships, she had spoken to several students and the students were in favor of selling the dorm. Of course, the college also has endowment funds – stocks, bonds, etc., the entire portfolio, not just real estate – that it can and has sold in times of need. Even the so-called “restricted” funds – called the “corpus” – could be sold, it merely requires approaching the estates of the donors for permission. Of course, this wouldn't be a pleasant situation and – for some potential future donors who like to attach their names permanently to things, it would scare them away – but The Cooper Union has often attracted donors who don't desire their names to be attached to places, programs, or degrees. Although he specifically endowed it, there is no Andrew Carnegie Engineering Day School. The Hewitt Building was named after the deceased Edward Hewitt, not after the donors, including Cornelius Vanderbilt and JP Morgan, who endowed it. The major problem is that the “restricted” endowments tend to go to the mission of the college – towards education, namely teacher salaries – whereas no one wants to endow administrative bloat or a debt service. Instead, the Bharucha administration has taken on MORE debt – a bridge loan, along with the bank fees to get it – and driven Cooper expenses up further.

Administration Narrative: Dating back to 1970, the revenue from the Chrysler Building has not kept up with inflation.

Counter-Narrative: In 1973, the income from the Chrysler Building was \$1.86M. By 2010, it had risen to \$26.6M. Under no definition of inflation – the Consumer Price Index, even the Higher Education Price Index – can it not be said that the income from the Chrysler Building hasn't more than DOUBLED inflation. Even when, in the 1990's, it started to fall, it still remained 50% over inflation. This new narrative – the last to come from Dr. Bharucha before his resignation – is, in every way, a lie.

If the Board, the administrators, and the Attorney General's office want the Cooper Union community to trust anything they say, these lies must stop – as told to the media, as told on campus, and as told to the world. Fundraising cannot be conducted in an environment of lies. The time for truth starts NOW.

The current version of this document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/counter-narratives2.pdf>>. Corrections to this document are appreciated and, if based on substantiated facts from legitimate sources, will be implemented by the author. The original version was completed on June 16, 2015, with the first revision on June 20, 2015.

The Alumni Pioneer, <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/Cassandra/cooper.html>>, was a virtual newspaper with breaking news stories and links to analyses, sources and the media. It was written and formatted in an inverted-

pyramid newspaper style to facilitate quick access to what is deemed the most important information. It is now a news archive.