

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI PIONEER

CUAA Secedes from Union (rev 1)

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Abstract

The history of the CUAA, leading up to the conflicts that have precipitated a break with the college and the establishment of independent websites, mailings lists, events, publications, and bank accounts.

Early history

The Cooper Union Alumni Association was incorporated in December of 1896 by nine alumni (<http://www.notnicemusic.com/CUAA_1896.pdf>). The association's objects were stated as:

- To promote the usefulness and influence of The Cooper Union;
- To unite in the bonds of fellowship those who have graduated from its halls of study;
- To further improve them through the medium of essays, discussions and the encouragement of original study and investigation of the arts and science; and
- To assist as far as possible worthy students of the school.

Prior to incorporation in 1896, dating back to at least 1890, the Cooper Union Alumni Association existed as a society meeting on campus once a month for the reading of essays, discussions, and later, musical performances. Membership was originally restricted to those with medals and diplomas, although other former students could join as "associate alumni" and members of the Board of Trustees, the faculty, and staff could join as "honorary members."

It wasn't until 1902, years later, that the college received its first financial gifts from two alumni, independent of the CUAA, according to Abram Hewitt in his oft-quoted commencement speech (<<http://tinyurl.com/o423sgp>>).

There was a time where the CUAA became associated with a single department of the school, and four independent alumni associations were formed and unified in an Alumni Federation around 1919. Eventually, these consolidated back down to a single CUAA, with membership open to all former students who had matriculated for at least one year and left in good standing, although they could only become members once the class they were in had graduated. In 2014, the Council started efforts to change the Constitution of the CUAA to grant membership to seniors, but these proposed changes in the Constitution and other changes to the Bylaws have not yet been implemented by the CUAA membership.

By the 1960's, the CUAA was collecting money into an "Alumni Fund" and had its own employees. The celebration of Founder's Day and the laying of wreaths on the Peter Cooper monument as well as at Peter Cooper's gravesite in Green-Wood Cemetery and on a bust of Peter Cooper date back to at least 1925.

Memorandum of Agreement of July 1974

During the recession of the early 1970's, the college took several steps which provoked protest from students, faculty, and alumni. Grandiose plans formulated in the 1960's, which included the gut renovation of the Foundation Building (only the exterior façade is landmarked), were paid for by the sale of Green Camp, a DASNY loan, and savings from elimination of the Physics degree and the lay-off of tenured faculty members. In response, the full-time faculty unionized, and the alumni association agreed to merge with the college in exchange for three democratically elected representatives on the Board of Trustees and ex-officio (non-voting) Council appointees on Cooper Union committees (the Council was formerly known as the Alumni Association Board of Governors). The independent Alumni Association office and the Office of Alumni Relations were merged, with the former becoming employees of The Cooper Union, appointed by the President of The Cooper Union with the approval of the Alumni Association Council.

The 1974 MOA (<http://www.notnicemusic.com/CUAA_1974.pdf>) included financial transactions as well. The CUAA retained full responsibility for the Alumni Fund, while a PE Review Course administered by the Alumni Office would provide its net income directly to the Annual Fund. The Alumni Fund became a designated fund that was part of the Cooper Union endowment, and the full-time Alumni Association employees were granted retirement benefits paid for by the college in addition to their existing pension, social security, and TIAA entitlements. Operating funds for the CUAA were to be provided by the college from a budget formulated by the Council and submitted to the trustees by the President of the Cooper Union.

Finally, under the original 1974 MOA, the CUAA directed the operation of the newly merged Alumni Office and took full responsibility for all alumni activities.

The MOA was amended in January 2000. Representation on the Board of Trustees was increased (<http://www.cualumni.com/s/1289/images/editor_documents/cuaa_handbook.pdf>) from three representatives serving 3-year terms to four representatives serving 4-year terms, and the President of the CUAA became an ex-officio (non-voting) member of the Board. Approval of Alumni Office appointments would require approval of the Executive Committee of the CUAA, not the entire Council. Although the CUAA retained "full responsibility for all alumni activities," the CUAA now "assume[d] leadership" for the Alumni Fund and the operation of the Alumni Office. There may have been historical confusion on the difference between the Alumni Fund (part of the endowment) and the Annual Fund (part of the operating budget).

By this time, the CUAA had adopted a mission statement to "provide[] a vital link between the alumni and the institution, building a strong body of support to preserve, protect and promote The Cooper Union." The four objectives of the CUAA had been changed to:

- Service to Alumni: Develop and manage a broad range of programs, events and services that foster career development among the alumni and enable alumni to maintain strong relationships with their fellow alumni and with the institution.
- Service to School: Engage the alumni in actively supporting the mission of the school by harnessing the skills, abilities and experiences of the alumni body for the benefit of The Cooper Union.
- Financial Support of the School: Provide motivation and leadership that encourages strong financial support from alumni.
- Recognition: Recognize and promote the achievements of its alumni and the institution to students, alumni and the external community to highlight the importance of The Cooper Union.

In addition to a President, two Vice Presidents, a Secretary/Treasurer, and a Nominating Committee Chairperson, the Executive Committee included an Annual Fund Committee Chairperson, whose responsibilities included management of the Phonathons.

Recent history

After the crash of 2008 brought on the Great Recession, a new President of the Cooper Union was hired by the Board of Trustees under a contract that started on July 1, 2011. On his last day in office, the previous President fired the Director of Alumni Relations.

The position remained vacant during the whirlwind of meetings and announcements between October 2011 and December 2011. In October, the President of the Cooper Union first informed the Council of the financial crisis, which was announced to the press and to the students by the end of the month. In November 2011 the CU President announced a hiring freeze and proposed a “reinvention strategy” which preserved “access” but did not mention the full-tuition scholarship policy, despite statements to the press that changes to the scholarship policy would only be implemented as a “last resort.” Negotiations with the full-time faculty union on a new contract were suspended for a year (they would end up delayed for over two years), students organized on-line petitions and websites, as well as peaceful protests and exhibits of protest on school property, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees met with students and alumni in an Open Forum in the Great Hall in which he first articulated (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVrW1Oyq4vs>) that he blamed the alumni for the financial crisis, while a group of alumni, with the approval and participation of many members of the CUAA Executive Committee, organized a Community Summit in the Great Hall for December 2011. In a presage of difficulties to come, someone in the leaderless Alumni Office censored announcement of the Community Summit to the CUAA membership.

Despite the announced hiring freeze, in December 2011 the new CU President hired a Director of Alumni Affairs and created a new position, Director of the Annual Fund. Three years later, all 2011 members of the “Alumni Office” had left and been replaced or had been fired. Unlike the former Director of Alumni Relations, the Director of Alumni Affairs rarely attended CUAA Council meetings and Executive Committee meetings. Communications between the CUAA Council and the CUAA membership were routinely censored, except that the President of the CUAA penned several letters to the CUAA membership without the knowledge, review, or approval of the CUAA Executive Committee or the Council. This culminated with the controversial blast of a private letter penned by the CUAA President to the Council to the entire CUAA membership after the student protests of the October and December 2012 Board of Trustee meetings and the “lock-in” in the Clocktower.

Despite the written support of the 2011-2013 CUAA President, the Council and Alumni Trustees were responsive to alumni sentiment. An alumni trustee who supported tuition resigned, and an anti-tuition alumni trustee was elected in an extraordinary write-in campaign after it became known (through social media) that the nominee of the CUAA Nominating Committee supported tuition, as well. The Council unanimously passed resolutions in support of retaining the full-tuition scholarship and slates of anti-tuition candidates were elected to the Council. Many Council members acted as facilitators at breakout sessions that led to the writing of “The Way Forward.” When two non-Council alumni attempted to attend and document Council meetings, the Council voted to open its meetings to all CUAA members (Cooper students were admitted, also); one of those alumni was elected to the Council and set up livestreaming and dial-in for CUAA members. Alumni Trustees came to Council meetings and started to report back to the Council and to the CUAA membership. Although a CUAA website, Cooper Commons, was active for only a limited time, the Council retained control of the CUAA Facebook and LinkedIn pages, and got its minutes, events, and committee reports, no matter how controversial, posted to the cualumni.com website. After the tuition announcement in March 2013 (not implemented until September 2014), the Council got the Board of Trustees to agree to award full-tuition scholarships to all incoming freshmen if an extraordinary Annual Fund goal was reached. When the April 2013 sit-in was ended with the Working Group Agreement, the Council was the first to enact elections for representatives to the Working Group, and unanimously endorsed its Report. The Council and the Executive Committee honored alumni who had been active in the efforts to keep Cooper tuition free at the April 2014 Founders Day Street Fair.

The Administration Strikes Back

In addition to the attempts at censorship, the anti-alumni rhetoric, and the strained relations between the Council and members of the Alumni Office under the Development Office, the administration and Board took several actions that attempted to isolate and disrupt alumni privileges and rights. The first was suspension of issuing CUAA ID cards paired with threats to keep alumni out of the Cooper Union library. The Alumni Office formed “Affinity Groups” that were independent of the Council, and the Development Office sponsored a series of Regional Chapter events (some got quite rowdy, despite administration efforts), in clear violation of the original MOA and the revised version. As part of the Working Group Agreement, Free Cooper Union was supposed to have been provided with on-campus office space; instead, the students were provided with access to the Alumni Roof Terrace on the 8th floor of 41 Cooper Square.

The final act that led to a total impasse between the CUAA Council and the college was the conversion of the AlumniSpace in the Student Residence over to offices for the Vice President of Student Affairs. The AlumniSpace had been endowed by Peter Torracco ME '28, who provided a large donation towards the construction of the Student Residence with the understanding that it include a space for various alumni committees to hold meetings. In addition to all of the prior acts documented here, the 2013-2015 CUAA President was outraged that the conversion of the space was announced to him by e-mail, and instituted an “embargo” of the Alumni Office and cualumni.com. The website became frozen, with the newly elected Executive Committee, Council, and changes in Development Staff not updated. Matters escalated when the Council committees and the Council itself were denied space on campus to hold their meetings. Administrative (computer password access) privileges to Council members for the cualumni.com website were suspended by the college, so that committee and Council minutes could not be posted. Resolutions relating to the May 2014 lawsuit against the college and the endorsement of the work of an ad hoc committee on the formation of the Associates (an independent body described in the charter which was to be provided with office space and had the power to remove trustees) could not be distributed to the CUAA membership, and off-campus meetings, although open to alumni, were not livestreamed or archived for out-of-town alumni, as the CUAA President attempted negotiations and the Council secretly worked to establish its own CUAA mailing list and website. The Council also formed an ad hoc committee to consider re-establishing independence of the CUAA from the college. The CUAA President also refused to appoint an Annual Fund Committee Chairperson, and a fall 2014 Annual Fund mailing to previous donors (alumni, parents, and other individuals) was supposedly penned by an alumnus, Paul Heller ME '53, which contained language in praise of the “new scholarship policy” (“I’m relieved to know with the new scholarship policy the students who really need the help are getting more than ever before.”). This was in stark contrast to the previous year’s fall mailing, which attempted to raise funds to restore the full-tuition scholarships for all, and the Free Since 1859 campaign endorsed by the Council and the Working Group). This was in addition to a curious Alumni Office mailing titled “The Cooper Union News You Want, Where You Want It,” which directed alumni to cooper.edu instead of cualumni.com, the establishment of career training seminars for alumni, the near cessation of alumni events, and six months of e-mails that failed to acknowledge the existence of the CUAA, as well as a curious announcement of the resurrection of the snail mail publication of “At Cooper Union” (which had evolved into a monthly virtual newsletter).

The CUAA President attempted to bring the crisis to the attention of the Board of Trustees, but the Board considered relations between the CUAA Council and the college to be an operational matter to be handled by the CU President. Reporters from media outlets started to learn about the apparent ban from campus of the Council, although no stories had yet been published.

CUAA Secession

The Council continued to support negotiations between the CUAA President and the college administration. The Council showed the administration that it had developed the ability to communicate directly with the entire

CUAA membership (or at least, those members with e-mail addresses), and an independent website was ready for launch. This culminated in a November 19, 2014, meeting between the CUAA President and Secretary/Treasurer, the CU President and Director of Alumni Affairs, and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees and another trustee (both lawyers).

A Joint Summary of the meeting announced the deactivation of cualumni.com, the secession of the CUAA as an independent organization, the establishment of separate alumni websites and mailing lists, and an official splitting of alumni events between the CUAA and the college, with Founders Day (which includes the various awards) retained by the CUAA. The college agreed to provide space for meetings on campus, with the cost of audio-visual and telephony support to be borne by the CUAA.

Commentary

Although Alumni Trustees were active in arranging for the meeting, none were involved in the negotiations. Alumni representation on college committees and the existence of alumni trustees (in July 2012, the CUAA President became a fifth voting member of the Board of Trustees) does not appear to be under question, as the CUAA President and the Alumni Trustees have continued to attend Board of Trustee meetings. The size of the Board of Trustees has grown to dilute alumni votes, unlike Dartmouth, where there was an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate the alumni majority on their board. The formation of the Associates – and suggestions that the CUAA itself might become the Associates – appears, for now, to be waiting resolution of the May 2014 lawsuit which, given a similar legal action at NYU, might take two or three years. Despite the “embargo” and temporary loss of direct communications between the CUAA Council and the CUAA membership, the Committee to Save Cooper Union raised over \$300,000 before the Joint Summary was issued, most of that from alumni. The issue of confidentiality agreements imposed by the Board on trustees, and the right of the Board to refuse elected representatives (although never enacted for alumni trustees, it has recently been enacted for student trustees), is not mentioned by the MOA or in the current negotiations. Protected by the Charter, recent alumni trustees have attempted to stretch or test the boundaries of their confidentiality agreements.

In December 2014, a recent member of the CUAA Executive Committee, and former elected member of the Working Group, is to be seated as the next elected alumni trustee. A follow-up meeting between the CUAA representatives and the administration is scheduled for December 4, 2014.

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The current version of this document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/cuaa.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 November 22, 2014, with a later version posted on November 23, 2014.

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 was deemed the most important information. It is now an archive.