

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI & PIONEER

My Fantasy Presidential Address

by Barry Drogin, EE '83

On December 13, 2011, President Jamshed Bharucha will address the Cooper Union Community. The content of the speech is currently unknown. This is what we would like to hear him say.

I was appointed as the next President of The Cooper Union in February of 2011. I assumed office in July of 2011. And I was formally inaugurated in October of 2011. At the end of that month, I told *The New York Times* about the financial situation at The Cooper Union, about the formation of a Revenue Task Force, and about the possibility of charging tuition at The Cooper Union.

I also spoke to the students. I started a panic that I regret and that I apologize for.

A recent graduate, Henry Chapman, started a petition to keep The Cooper Union tuition-free. Although The Cooper Union has less than a thousand students, although The Cooper Union has only twelve thousand living graduates, and we are only in touch with six thousand of them, Henry Chapman's petition, through social media, through private e-mails, through mouth-to-mouth communications, managed to gather four thousand signatures within days of my announcements. The administration did not publicize this petition. I did not acknowledge the existence of this petition. I acknowledge it now.

I invited members of the Cooper Union Community to meet with me. I have had some extraordinary conversations with many extraordinary individuals. During this period, the students of The Cooper Union, along with the faculty, held a teach-in in front of the Foundation Building. The art students used their outstanding creativity to create an exhibition in the colonnade of the Foundation Building. The administration did not publicize these events. I did not acknowledge the existence of these events. I acknowledge them now.

On-line, on social media websites, the Cooper Union Community came together to conduct a grand discourse on the meaning of this institution and on the meaning of a free education in America today. I listened as an adjunct faculty member called in to the Brian Lehrer show and stated on WNYC radio that he would give up his job in this economy to keep this institution tuition-free. I listened to David Gersten, an alumnus and faculty member, who wrote eloquently, "It's not that Cooper Union holds up free education — but that free education holds up The Cooper Union."

I reached out to the alumni. In the words of our deed, the alumni rallied around this institution. In the words of Peter Cooper, the alumni rallied around this institution "to protect it, and make it like a city set on a hill, that cannot be hid." In its time of need, the alumni gave generously, both financially, and of their time.

Some alumni used social media tools to rally around this institution. Sean Cusack provided twitter feeds and set up a wiki. Barry Drogin set up a virtual newspaper. Kerry Carnahan organized a community summit in the Great Hall, moderated by alumni council member Karina Tipton, and featuring speeches by its president, Peter Cafiero, its Vice President, Rocco Cetera, and the Annual Fund Committee chair, Nick Agneta. The administration did not publicize this work. I did not acknowledge the existence of this work. I acknowledge it, and acknowledge them, now.

I vowed to bring transparency to the Presidency of The Cooper Union. Alumnus Kevin Slavin said, at this podium, “Transparency is not a promise. It’s not an idea. It’s action. The answer to whether The Cooper Union should be more transparent is not the word ‘yes.’ The answer is to be more transparent.”

Over the past month, my administration has stayed on message. When I announced this address, I announced it to the Cooper Union Community and my administration barred the press. Kevin is correct, transparency is not a promise, it’s an action. I met with Kevin last week, and have started the process of providing the real materials of transparency to him. And I have invited the press here today.

I have learned so much from the Cooper Union Community in the past month. I have learned from the students, from the faculty, and from the alumni, that the Cooper Union is not a building. The Cooper Union is not its employees. The Cooper Union is an institution of higher learning, but it is unique. I have worked in academia my entire life. I have travelled the country speaking about education reform. But The Cooper Union does not need to be reformed. The Cooper Union is an example of what the educational system of our country should aspire to be.

In the past, there have been other institutions of higher learning which have gone from a free-tuition model to a tuition model. But when they did so, faculty members did not offer to give up their jobs to keep those institutions tuition-free. There have been institutions of higher learning who have raised tuition and been subjected to student strikes. But when they did so, the alumni of the college did not offer to give more to prevent those raises.

I said that I will not be the President to shut this institution down. But The Cooper Union is not a building. The Cooper Union is not its employees. The Cooper Union is a community united by one idea, articulated by Abram Hewitt, who attributed it to Peter Cooper, that education at The Cooper Union be “as free as air and water.”

The Cooper Union has survived a Great Depression. The Cooper Union survived the recession of the seventies. It has had to make painful decisions to stay alive. It sold Green Camp, a property beloved to the community. It closed a department and laid off tenured faculty, an action that led to the formation of the faculty union. It changed its governance to allow for more alumni oversight, a step whose purpose and intention has been allowed to erode with time.

I have said that The Cooper Union is cut to the bone. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees has said that The Cooper Union is a lean ship. But it isn’t. The alumni, students, faculty, charitable individuals and institutions have pledged financial support to The Cooper Union of over half a million dollars to keep The Cooper Union tuition-free. They have put their money on the table.

The administration knows this is not enough. I know this is not enough. But I have already met with Professor Richard Stock, the President of the faculty union, to start a process where all of the stakeholders of The Cooper Union will join together to make it enough. I will match your pledge. As of today, I will take a token salary of one dollar to be the President of The Cooper Union.

As of today, I am stating publicly and unequivocally that Cooper Union’s undergraduate schools of architecture, art and engineering will remain completely tuition-free.

I want to lead The Cooper Union. I want to guide The Cooper Union. But I do not want to control The Cooper Union. The students have demanded that everything be “on the table.” The faculty has vowed to work with me to identify how we can preserve an education that is equal to the best at a lower cost. The alumni have been working to bring us all together to solve Cooper Union’s problems and create a sustainable model for the future.

It is not in my nature to blame previous administrations for our current financial situation. It is not in my nature to blame the Board of Trustees for the decisions they made that have led to our current financial situation. But it is in my nature to be more honest with the Cooper Union Community and with the media about what brought us to our current financial situation. The Cooper Union negotiated an excellent lease for the Chrysler Building, but the Cooper Union also took risks with its investment portfolio that did not survive the economic collapse of 2008 as well as we needed. The Cooper Union took out a loan to guarantee the construction price of the New Academic Building, but at an interest rate that was too high. The Cooper Union proceeded with construction of the New Academic Building before raising enough in its capital campaign to pay for it and, although the New Academic Building is the first LEED-Platinum building in Manhattan, the savings in energy do not compensate for the costs of maintenance and security that a modern college in a very modern and already famous building require.

Since its opening in 2009, we have referred to this building as the New Academic Building, or NAB. The Cooper Union does not have a Carnegie Hall, it has The Great Hall. The Cooper Union does not have a Cooper Building, it has a Foundation Building. And rather than offer up the New Academic Building to some individual or institution as a naming opportunity, I will be proposing to the Board of Trustees that the New Academic Building be renamed the Hewitt Building, so that future generations will always know that education at The Cooper Union will remain “as free as air and water.”

The engineering, art, and architecture resources of The Cooper Union will help us through these hard economic times. This Union for the advancement of science and art will remain unified. The Cooper Union Community will work together, openly and honestly, to make the decisions and the sacrifices to keep this unique institution alive.

It is customary to end an address with the words, “thank you.” I truly do thank the Cooper Union Community for what it has done, and for what I know it will do. Thank you.

This document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/fantasy.pdf>>. It was completed on December 9, 2011.

The Alumni Pioneer, <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/Cassandra/cooper.html>>, is a virtual newspaper with breaking news stories and links to analyses, sources and the media. It is written and formatted in an inverted-pyramid newspaper style to facilitate quick access to what is deemed the most important information.