

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI & PIONEER

The Real Narrative

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Abstract

Faced with so many false narratives from the administration, *The Alumni Pioneer* provides the real narrative of The Cooper Union, from its founding through changes in the 20th century and past an announcement to start charging students tuition in September of 2014.

Since the fiscal crisis was announced and *The Alumni Pioneer* was founded, the administration, in the guise of President Jamshed Bharucha, Vice President TC Westcott, Board Chair Mark Epstein, and various trustees and public relations employees have fed the students, faculty, staff, alumni, and general public a succession of narratives, typically citing some financial numbers, percentages, or historical events to form a believable story but within a context of diversion, distraction, self-justification, or planned outcome. At times, the Cooper Union Community, and *The Alumni Pioneer* in particular, has shaped or even provoked the modification of narratives, as when *The Student Guide to the Cooper Union Financial Crisis*, innocently created for the incoming freshmen of September 2012, attracted a wider audience of journalists and others, resulting in a highly misleading FAQ on the Cooper Union website. The FAQ was, itself, responded to with an *Alumni Pioneer* AQAF and a *Friends of Cooper Union* FUQ.

With another set of narratives released on the Cooper Union website in June of 2013, this time in reaction to the more common questions being asked, it is tempting to merely respond directly to these new narratives, dissect them, refute them, and show them, again, to be another set of half-truths used to justify current decisions and divert attention from other decisions that have already been made or are planned in the near future. *The Alumni Pioneer* has done that in a new YouTube video, "Ask Mr. Misinformation" <<http://youtu.be/eNFZvNC1Hgw>>.

In addition, in the tradition of *The Real Bharucha* and *The Real Cooper Union*, *The Alumni Pioneer* offers *The Real Narrative*, a coherent, fact-based history of the college from its founding up to the present, as a resource to journalists and to members of the Cooper Union Community who need to fact check their assumptions, hopes, and understanding of what is possible, and as the ultimate corrective to all of the false narratives they have experienced in the past two years.

The reason Peter Cooper did not receive a formal education was not because he was poor, but was because he was sickly and home-schooled and, later, self-taught. He managed to acquire a spectacular technological education, and he associated with many political movements, most notably the abolitionists and those against the gold standard. His major regret about his lack of formal education was a struggle with expression in English, primarily spelling. One presumes that his various published speeches were either transcribed or cleaned up by diligent editors.

The "Mechanic of New York," he was deeply interested in all things technological. He also had strong early experiences with personal debt, with risky investments, and with economic boom/bust cycles that made him extremely anti-bank. He believed that industrious men should not be at the mercy of market forces, and that industrious women should not be forced by poverty into "bad marriages." Except that he found poetry and engineering invention themselves to be beautiful, he did not have an eye, understanding, or appreciation for

pictorial arts such as painting or sculpture, although he ended up associating with many other wealthy people who were collectors and were obsessed with “high culture,” especially as imported from Europe.

Andrew Carnegie, another industrialist who had come from a poor family, had publicly vowed to return his wealth to the common man when he retired. Peter Cooper took that principle and decided that more immediate action, if possible, should be planned for and implemented. He was involved in a previous effort to provide free education and, upon its failure, decided to make it a personal project, citing a French model as inspiration.

Abram Hewitt, who similarly came from modest means but worked his way through Columbia University, became a second son to Peter Cooper, a business partner with Peter Cooper’s son, and married Peter Cooper’s daughter. Abram Hewitt was a political pragmatist and did not agree with all of Peter Cooper’s political philosophies, but did believe in the importance and usefulness of post-secondary higher education. Peter Cooper had the vision; Abram Hewitt turned the vision into reality.

The plots of land necessary for the Cooper Union were finally all purchased, a cornerstone laid, and construction began. All of this was completely funded by Peter Cooper. The Great Hall was the first to be built and open, followed by an enormously popular free reading room that stayed open at night to accommodate workers, and street-level shops to provide some revenue. Although Peter Cooper was only interested in establishing a free polytechnic school, he learned of the existence of a free design school for women, and allowed them to occupy the building before the charter, curriculum and classes for the polytechnic school were complete. The idea for a “union” – a highly politicized word not meaning trade unions, but the union of northern states and southern states split over the issue of slavery – enchanted Peter Cooper, although he sought a unification of many disciplines, not only engineering and art, but also political economy, social graces and issues, debate and oratory, and the like. His plans included museums, both natural and artistic, although those plans were never fully developed. When a charter for The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art was approved by the state legislature, it included the polytechnic school, the Great Hall lectures, the free reading room, and the women’s school of design.

Advertisements for the three schools (a men’s school of design was also included) clearly stated the free nature of all instruction. The initial principles of the Cooper Institute (many shied away from the politically-charged word “union”) were simple: free lectures for the public, free reading matter for the public, free classes in “industrial” arts such as architectural drafting and coloring of lithographs, and free classes in post-trade polytechnical subjects like math and science for potential inventors, all funded by a rich benefactor returning his accumulated wealth to the people of New York City. Up until his death, it is estimated that Peter Cooper provided nearly one million dollars to the Institute, supplemented only by commercial rents from businesses on the first floor and top floor of the Foundation Building.

Since Peter Cooper owned the land under the Foundation Building and endowed it to the Institute, paid for the construction of the building, and provided funding for teachers, art supplies, and lab materials, and since the charter provided that no taxes be paid to the government for the property, the expenses of the college were limited to teacher salaries, reading room literature, and supplies. The free classes, much in demand, were limited more by available classroom space than by the cost of instructors. The un-paid trustees acted as president, secretary, and treasurer, with the assistance of a clerk. Aside from instructors, the schools each eventually hired a single principal or superintendent over the passing years. The reading room had a curator and a few custodians. In addition to free events sponsored by the college in the Great Hall, the Great Hall was also rented out, which also generated some income.

On one hand, the free classes were “eleemosynary,” intended to provide education to those who could not afford to attend universities and colleges, both due to the cost of the colleges and due to problems of self-support while attending college. The Cooper Institute provided various solutions to the latter problem,

providing financial grants to those who needed it, allowing students to profit off of their classwork, and providing night classes so that tradesmen could work during the day and receive their education at night.

A tiny glitch in the principles of the college was the pre-existing women's school of design, which had allowed ladies of leisure to attend drawing classes along with the industrial students. The trustees dealt with this in their first annual report; instead of banning the rich from these female art classes, their number would be limited. The proportion of paying "amateur" students to full-time free "industrial" students (as well as a third category, females who intended to graduate and become teachers themselves), varied in the first decades, and, eventually, the "amateurs" were pushed into the afternoon into their own classes. At first, the "amateurs" were like auditors, with lesser rules for attendance and for evaluation; both in their original form and when they were in their own classes, this provided an early model of "continuing education" by amateurs today.

The presence of the "rich" students in the women's school of design was thought to provide both financial and educational opportunities to the other students. Similarly, rich people were not prohibited from attending, providing or participating in the lectures and free reading room. The policy was that preference was given to the poor. A newspaper suggested that students of means were evicted from the free schools, but this may be the yellow journalism of the time. At one point the trustees considered levying a charge for well-to-do students in the polytechnic schools, but Peter Cooper responded by providing more funding to guarantee free education, and the matter was dropped. The all-encompassing principle of the "union" was to embrace both the rich and the poor, the trustees wrote; the school was not strictly to be charitable, although it certainly was.

After Peter Cooper's death, Abram Hewitt and Peter's son Edward Cooper were the chief benefactors of the school, and finally Andrew Carnegie retired and provided the Institute with a generous contribution of \$300,000. This finally led to a remarkable year in which Andrew Carnegie gave a second contribution of \$300,000, Abram Hewitt and Edward Cooper gave \$300,000 each (beyond their previous gifts) to match Andrew Carnegie's \$600,000 lifetime gifts, which was enough money to move the daytime shops out of the Foundation Building and allow for day-time polytechnic classes, in addition to the night-time polytechnic classes. 1902 was also the first year that a graduate provided a financial contribution to the school, and the first time that Abram Hewitt turned Peter Cooper's "open and free to all" quote into the more mellifluous "as free as air and water." As was the fashion of the time, striking oratorical phrases were repeated, and Hewitt used the "as free as air and water" citation two more times, although he provided different back-stories with each repetition.

Since the "amateur class" was abolished in 1887, since there were no student fees, lab fees, tuition charges, or any other costs for the women's day school of art, the men's night school of art (the equivalent of the architecture school), the egalitarian night school of engineering, and the newly formed egalitarian day school of engineering, since its founding by charter in 1859, The Cooper Union was always "completely gratuitous," as the trustees phrased it, with, as noted, some students paid for sustenance or for their classwork. If students desired to obtain a personal copy of a textbook, it was sold to them at cost.

1915 was another significant year for The Cooper Union – the Hewitt Building, built from donated funds from Carnegie, JP Morgan, Vanderbilt, and other friends of the deceased mayor (both Edward Cooper, Peter's son, and Abram Hewitt, Peter's son-in-law, became mayors), was completed, providing room for more classes. 1915 was also the first year that the first-come/first-served policy for admission was changed to admission by portfolio and examination. It's not that The Cooper Union wanted to admit only the best and brightest, but that, since its founding, the college had a problem with attendees unable to finish the full course of instruction. Originally, the college recognized students for attendance, provided certificates for successful completion of individual courses, and medals and degrees for those who completed the full course of instruction. Given the high demand for the courses, the trustees were persuaded by an administrator that limiting admission to those most able to complete the coursework was a better policy than merely trusting letters of recommendation, the policy at the college's founding.

It should be noted that Peter Cooper, Edward Cooper, Abram Hewitt, Andrew Carnegie, JP Morgan, Frederick Vanderbilt and many others who provided cash and land endowments to the college did not, themselves, attend the college. It is known that “The Union for the Advancement of Science and Art” was changed by the legislature to “The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art,” although the circumstance of the change is lost to myth. The Hewitt Building was built after the death of Abram Hewitt and named in his honor. At Cooper there is no Carnegie Hall or Carnegie Library, nor did any of the other benefactors attach their names to the structures or the schools. The Cooper and Hewitt names live on in various honor societies for lifetime donors to the endowment, while the names of important curators, superintendents, and principals are lost to all but historians.

In 1938, Dr. Edward Burdell came to Cooper from MIT and established humanities courses and a humanities department. Under Burdell’s tenure the third facility, an engineering building at 51 Astor Place, was also built, and Norvin Hewitt Green, Peter Cooper’s great grandson, donated land in Ringwood, NJ, that became known as “Green Camp.” These changes were not revenue-generating, the Cooper economy was relatively simple, comprising of endowment income and the cost of instruction. The endowment income was supplemented by the city allowing property taxes on the Chrysler Building land to be paid to Cooper rather than the city, although the city assessed the value and amount of the property taxes.

Minimal material fees for art students and lab fees for engineering students have been traced back to 1940. A generic “student fee” didn’t get added until 1962. At this writing there is conflicting anecdotal evidence from alumni who attended prior to 1962 on which awards or scholarships students were allowed to keep and which The Cooper Union demanded be provided to the college.

1962 was also the year that Dr. Richard Humphreys became president of the school. He was concerned about the finances of the school, that the college not be distracted from providing an excellent undergraduate program by developing graduate programs, and not be swayed by an “edifice complex, a kind of infective hypnotism which make college administrators see visions of building big rather than teaching well.” This warning would turn out to be prescient.

Some time between 1969 and 1972, under one of the most hated presidents in Cooper Union history (White), after 110 years of living within its means, The Cooper Union revised its charter to no longer make trustees personally liable for the college’s debts, and allow the college to take out large building loans. The first was a loan from DASNY to finance the Hejduk renovation of the Foundation Building interior. Although the renovation was praised in architectural circles, the cost of the renovation and the debt service on the DASNY loan plunged the college into deficit, forcing the sale of Green Camp and the elimination of the physics degree (which allowed for layoff of tenured faculty). The night degree programs were also eliminated. The full-time faculty formed a union to protect themselves. The effect of the dislocation during construction has never been assessed.

The college was in such turmoil that the alumni association president signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the president of the college adding elected alumni trustee representatives to the board, restricting the role of the alumni office, and taking over fundraising for the college. Unfortunately, alumni trustees still were selected and acted as trustees, rich benefactors with little connection to the typical middle-class Cooper graduate. As The Cooper Union continued to adopt policies and implement goals that strayed far from its original mission, there is no indication that the alumni trustees or the alumni association president involved the alumni council or the alumni association in any meaningful discussion or consideration of those policies and goals. The alumni council was considered a fundraising arm of the institution, not a governing structure in the slightest.

The next president, Lacy, tried to eliminate the faculty union, claiming they were “managerial,” a case lost in court. The next president, Iselin, vowed to stress the New York City character of the college, but his presidency was marked by construction of a dormitory for out-of-state students (and an AlumniSpace used by out-of-state trustees and potential benefactors), using a second DASNY loan that again plunged the college into deficit.

The focus of the trustees and presidents shifted away from academic excellence and towards more mundane matters typical of many other colleges: the “edifice complex;” buying real estate (for presidents) and selling them upon their departure; union-busting; minimizing the number of full-time faculty (forcing the formation of a part-time faculty union), avoiding demands of accreditation bodies, and a constant obsession with name recognition for the school and for donors. Although it wasn’t considered a *quid pro quo* at the time, major benefactors found their names attached to schools (and diplomas), as well as numerous chairs and scholarship funds. As Cooper tried to be like other colleges, it also started to hire administrative staff to handle functions common at other colleges, but unconnected to the core mission of providing education to the students.

The worst was yet to come. The next president, Campbell, established tuition at The Cooper Union in order to become eligible for Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) funds for needy students. An ULURP process, allowing Cooper to lease out some properties for luxury and commercial development while moving most facilities to a larger Hewitt Building, was approved, and then the New York State Supreme Court allowed Cooper to increase its debt significantly by mortgaging the Chrysler Building. In a complex series of transaction – most accompanied by enormous transaction fees – The Cooper Union got the loan, paid off the DASNY bonds, put down a guaranteed maximum price for construction of the New Academic Building, and invested heavily in hedge funds, doing so over the advice of its conservative Vice President of Finance. Students were again tortured by the displacement of classes after the Hewitt Building was demolished. This was part of a “Master Plan” masterminded by Board Chair Bernhard, in concert with Astor Place Holding Corporation trustee Sandholm, investment committee chair Michaelson, and President Campbell. The faculty rejected the Master Plan but were ignored. The first kink in the Master Plan was the denial of full PILOT for the development properties approved in the ULURP. With the crash of 2008, the college saw huge losses in their investment portfolio, a long delay in construction at 51 Astor Place, and a sudden drop-off in charitable contributions. Nevertheless, a year-long party in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the college was held, and while the press and trustees were told that Cooper had survived the crash and was “in the black,” Cooper expenditures were allowed to zoom out of control, resulting in the largest deficits the college had ever known.

Although the New Academic Building remains unnamed (except for the initial “t” that Thom Mayne carved into its façade), the building is littered with naming opportunities: staircases, classrooms, lounges, and an Alumni Terrace where alumni can literally step on the names of each other. The new auditorium is named after the dead husband of a trustee, and in fifty years or so the entire building will be littered with the names of dead alumni and trustees. *The Alumni Pioneer* has taken to calling the NAB “the Names Building.”

It might seem that presidents more hated than White or Campbell would not materialize, but trustee Lapidus, dreaming of destroying the college and starting from scratch without unions or tenure, hand-picked Bharucha to “reinvent” the college. The trustees had negotiated a strange lease with Tishman Speyer, with sudden bumps in Chrysler Building rent, the first bump scheduled for 2018. With five years to go, the college was cash-poor in unrestricted endowment funds, despite Campbell’s ridiculous claims that he had grown the endowment from under \$100M to over \$600M and Michaelson’s claims that the college had out-performed the “Yale model” in his management of the investment portfolio.

The trustees and new administration knitted together a string of false narratives intended to shift blame away from their financial mismanagement of the college and make inevitable the destruction of the college’s mission. This started with firing the head of the alumni office and concocting a “Blame the Alumni” narrative based on a lie that only 25% of alumni gave money to the school. A pre-crash donor report backed up statements that annual alumni giving was actually 35% to 40%, and a post-crash donor report has been analyzed that supports

the statement that 70% to 80% of alumni donate to the school, but, for various personal reasons, only do so, on average, half of the time during their lifetimes.

Students, faculty, and alumni rejected abandonment of the mission, voted no confidence in Bharucha, and launched a one-week write-in campaign that placed a transparency candidate on the Board. A slate of anti-tuition candidates was elected to the Alumni Council as well, and student occupiers took over the president's office and mounted a free education art show that is touring internationally. At this writing, a trustee saved the free Saturday Program for high school students, a first slap in the face to the new for-pay high school, undergraduate, and graduate programs that Bharucha hopes to implement. The Board has also agreed to student representation. Many administrators and faculty members have jumped ship, and the mood on campus has progressed from fear to toxic. Government agencies and news media are questioning whether Cooper should be allowed to avoid paying property taxes on its commercial properties, local politicians held a march and protest against Cooper's plan to become an anchor tenant for an East Village community space being converted over to luxury dorms, and the "Cooper Union PR piñata" continues while Bharucha seeks to establish a third administrative branch devoted to increased propaganda.

All efforts by the Cooper Union Community to persuade the college to "grow down" and return to living within its means have so far been rejected by a change in the scholarship policy that will burden middle-class students – if they apply – with student debt. The fate of the college plays out at Internet speed, with the first paying students – assuming there are any – scheduled to arrive in September 2014. "The Way Forward," a community consensus document, must now be replaced with "The Way Back," something that will only be possible with the resignation or firing of Bharucha and the election of a new Board Chair devoted to over-turning the tuition decision as soon as possible.

While following a "politics of distraction," the trustees have been persuaded to put the college on a series of potential paths of destruction, either quickly or slowly. This is the real narrative of The Cooper Union.

The current version of this document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/narrative.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 23, 2013.

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.