

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI PIONEER

Becoming the Story

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Abstract

How Dr. Jamshed Bharucha, Derek Wittner, TC Westcott, Claire McCarthy, William Sandholm, John Michaelson, Stanley Lapidus, Mark Epstein, Don Blauweiss, and Francois de Menil made themselves, rather than the financial crisis, the story, and the constant threat that the administration will start their own rumor campaign against the *Alumni Pioneer* staff in an attempt to divert attention from themselves and make us the story.

The Alumni Pioneer is an advocacy virtual newspaper that exists solely to cover the story of the threat to start charging tuition at The Cooper Union (or, more precisely, to advocate for establishing a free education at The Cooper Union). Every story, every graphic, every link, relates in some way to the issue, and when the financial crisis is averted and consideration of eliminating free education from The Cooper Union is gone (or if it is instituted), then *The Alumni Pioneer* will remain as an Internet archive.

People made decisions that led to the crisis, and people will make decisions that resolve it. Unfortunately, when those people act (or fail to act) in egregious ways, they, in common media parlance, “become the story.” *The Alumni Pioneer* would prefer to concentrate on its core mission and guiding principles (to borrow some phrases from the Free Cooper Union movement) but, as a news reporting entity, when people choose to become the story, *The Alumni Pioneer* has no choice but to use the power of the press to act as a counter-balance.

This started with Jamshed Bharucha himself, who went to *The New York Times* just before announcing the Revenue Task Force to the Cooper Union Community on Halloween 2011, invited *Art in America* to his office for an interview a week later, attempted to keep the media from the Open Forum with Chair Epstein, and then imposed a media blackout on his staff just prior to Thanksgiving. Previous President George Campbell, Jr. was forced to write an Op Ed piece for *The Times* defending himself against what later became known to be a false “new president discovers financial crisis” narrative. The circumstances of Bharucha’s hiring, his claims about his accomplishments at Tufts, the letter he wrote to the Cooper Union Community, the interview with trustee Daniel Okrent published in *At Cooper Union*, and the subtle ways in which his writings and speeches have given little comfort to the Free Cooper Union movement, have served to make Bharucha himself perceived as part of the problem, not part of the solution. *The Alumni Pioneer* has had no choice but to report these stories, and to write editorials expressing the opinion that Jamshed Bharucha is the wrong person to lead The Cooper Union out of this fiscal crisis without destroying what makes The Cooper Union unique.

Admittedly, there are still members of the Cooper Union Community who like Jamshed (as he insists on being called), who think he is being misrepresented or demonized, who hate former President George Campbell, Jr. so much that any steps at transparency, no matter how selective or biased or defensive, are seen as a welcome relief. One of Jamshed’s greatest faults is his inability to keep his mouth shut, which led to panicking the students in the first place and the Free Cooper Union petition, and has led to many *Alumni Pioneer* news stories (and, undoubtedly, will lead to many more). If this story ends with Cooper charging tuition (or increasing greatly the charging of student fees), Jamshed’s defenders will have pie on their faces, or will rationalize that charging tuition at Cooper was “inevitable.” If Jamshed is fired, the words of his defenders will become moot.

And if, by some miracle, Cooper comes up with a solution, the Board decides to leave him in office, and he drops all dreams of “reinventing” The Cooper Union – well, we’ll print his *mea culpa* and leave it at that.

The Development Office, and its stranglehold on the Office of Alumni Relations, has also become the story, not only for its failure to meet the Capital Campaign goals, but for its violation of the Memorandum of Agreement between the Alumni Association and the college. The Alumni Council President and its Vice Presidents have found their communications with the Alumni Association censored, even on communications which claim to come from the Alumni Association itself (it’s kind of like the IRS putting out a message claiming to come from the people of the United States of America). It has been useful to learn that the Memorandum of Agreement came out of the fiscal crisis of the 70’s, when alumni found themselves unable to stop the sale of Green Camp. It is no surprise that the Free Cooper Union movement is directly challenging the Development Office, although Vice President Derek Wittner has managed to stay a dark figure throughout the crisis – so far.

This cannot be said of Vice President for Finance TC Westcott, who has had her share of media blunders. First, she presented slides to the students justifying the \$16.5 million difference between revenues and expenditures, then promptly hid them, replacing them with pie charts that provided no insight into how an austerity budget might be implemented. Her office also provided the false graphs justifying the equally false “decades of deficit spending” narrative and then, when they were questioned, admitted they were wrong but published a second set of false graphs. Unknown to the general public, TC Westcott has engaged in a series of promises and delays in dealing with *The Alumni Pioneer*, always claiming to be “out of the office” for long four and five day weekends when promises to provide information are not fulfilled. In the most recent version of this saga, TC Westcott scheduled an appointment with *The Alumni Pioneer*, asked for it to be delayed until after the release of the Board of Trustees summary, and then asked that questions be submitted in writing instead. Those who believe that the administration has made transparency its goal need merely consider TC Westcott’s odd e-mail to *The Alumni Pioneer* on November 29, 2011, “Because there has been lack of clarity with what numbers mean, I am no longer providing information other than the audited financial statements and the filed 990.” *The Alumni Pioneer* still can’t figure out exactly whose “lack of clarity” TC Westcott is referring to.

When, after four months in office, President Bharucha launched a media campaign about the financial crisis, conspiracy theorists were quick to jump in. Although there remains unexplained evidence to support the idea of a conspiracy, Director of Public Affairs Claire McCarthy has done much to lend credence to the idea that the administration is The Gang That Couldn’t Shoot Straight (to cite the title of the fictional Jimmy Breslin novel turned into a movie starring Robert De Niro and Jerry Orbach). From secret changes to the Cooper website to a complete failure to understand the Internet and social media, McCarthy’s blunders threaten to make her the story. When *The Villager* ran a front page story on the Free Cooper Union Summit that the administration attempted to suppress publicity about, the issue was accompanied by a contribution from McCarthy that was apparently written weeks before and not proofread for currentness or relevance. When the Presidential Address was announced, McCarthy wasn’t even aware that the alumni had been invited. Her media strategy appears to be to make believe that the media does not exist, and make believe the story does not exist. This leaves the media with no choice but to bypass her and go directly to administration sources, which means that, instead of controlling the message, she is completely out-of-the-loop. Well, not completely – both she and the Manager of Alumni Communications check the *Alumni Pioneer* website on a regular basis, according to our webmaster. Guess they have to get their information from somewhere.

The Board of Trustees themselves, both individually and collectively, are the natural focus for the story, and their blunders both before and after the story became truly public have been at the center of the story. William Sandholm graduated from Cooper to his first job at Rose Associates, and then used his power on the Board of Trustees to broker deals for the Rose family that go above and beyond the appearance of impropriety. John Michaelson made the mistake of bragging to the Wall Street Journal and CNBC about Cooper’s hedge funds, hoping that no one would notice that a change in accounting principle - changing the value of the endowment from including the depreciated cost of the Chrysler Building (zero) to the “fair value” of the Chrysler Building

(rising to over \$400 million) - would mask the fact that, after a decade-long Capital Campaign, the value of the investment portfolio is about what it was a decade earlier (Campbell hopes that no one notices this, either, and *The New York Times* has published these false numbers so many times, its own reporters are oblivious to the error and continue to get it wrong). Stanley Lapidus apparently thought he was acting as a white knight when he hand-selected Jamshed Bharucha for The Cooper Union, Chairman Mark Epstein provided a bad impression by appearing at the Open Forum with a lawyer, and Alumni Trustee Don Blauweiss was publicly admonished by Kevin Slavin for refusing to report about Board activities to the alumni who elected him. It was probably inevitable that the *cy pres* petition, and the Master Plan, would come to light, but failing to address the fact that all six “interconnected initiatives” of the Master Plan were not implemented does not bode well for the Board as a whole. Even the appointment of Francois de Menil as Vice Chairman with no explanation is a further misstep, when the story should be how to solve the financial crisis, not the comings and goings of those whose fiduciary duty it is to solve it.

Unlike other media, *The Alumni Pioneer* gets no advertising revenue and its Publisher has sought to deflect attention from himself and from his website and closed business and towards the story itself. In a media environment where the civility of public discourse has become a major story, the Publisher’s decision to remove himself from the fray of discussion forums has been both a blessing, allowing time to research and report the story quickly and efficiently, and a curse, as those obsessed with social media think that if you don’t participate in the discussion, your information must be invalid or not credible. Other *Alumni Pioneer* staff members who have stepped into the discussion forums have been burned, as well. A problem for both the supporters and the naysayers is that the information in *The Alumni Pioneer* is just too good to be ignored, and the number of people with a full grasp of the complexity of the multiple parts of the story are few. The Publisher is thankful that *The Villager* did not run with a “West Village resident covers story” lede and focused on the Free Cooper Union Summit itself.

Unlike those working behind the scenes or those who have chosen to stay anonymous, the *Alumni Pioneer* staff have chosen to put their names on their work. In his Presidential Address, Bharucha dismissively referred to those who would “fan the flames of rage and rancor.” *The Alumni Pioneer* staff itself is under constant threat that the administration will start their own campaign against us in an attempt to divert attention from themselves and make us the story. We are unpaid volunteers devoted to the Free Cooper Union cause. We will do anything possible to advance the cause, including stepping aside, if necessary. We are not the story, but, judging from our fan mail and webstats – over 2500 hits on our front page in two months, and 500 downloads each of “Counter-Narratives to the Administration Narrative,” “Do You Want Deficit With That?,” and “The Real Bharucha” in the same two month period – we are enjoying some success in telling the story.

To paraphrase a local chant the administration may not be familiar with, we’re here – get used to it.

The current version of this document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/story.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 January 15, 2012.

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. The abstract was added on January 28, 2012.