

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI & PIONEER

A Tale of Two Coopers

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Abstract

The administration and the various factions of the Free Cooper Union movement are talking past each other, disagreeing on facts, logic, and reasoning. They will meet for a final show-down on March 1, 2013. *The Alumni Pioneer* presents the narratives of both sides, and tries to fill-in the blanks of the half-truths being spread by one side and ignorance being displayed by the other.

Despite great efforts towards unity, it certainly is not the best of times for The Cooper Union. Unfortunately, this is the only point of agreement between the many who have come together to save the college and the few with the responsibility and position to do so. The voices of the administration – in letters to the so-called Cooper Union Community, in speeches, in recordings, and in transcripts – and their associated actions have returned to a script in stark contrast to the expressed will and determination of the many individuals and organizations that have risen up to preserve the institution and its mission. The letters from the office of the president, the words of the chairman of the Board of Trustees, the press releases and the websites that the college controls, all stand as evidence of a narrative that attempts to communicate in the simplest terms an inevitable outcome that thousands oppose. Here, then, are these two tales.

Roots of the Crisis

Administration

The college has no more assets to sell
The Chrysler Building rent fell in the 90's
Decades of deficit spending
Only 20% of alumni contribute
Higher education without tuition is not sustainable

Free Cooper Union

The NAB shouldn't have been built
The Chrysler Building shouldn't have been mortgaged
40% of alumni contribute
Free education holds up The Cooper Union

Where the truth lies: The administration loses on this one. During the recession of the 70's, the college earned half of its operating revenue from its non-real estate endowment, and there was no deficit spending in the 80's. A series of building projects – starting with the gutting of the Foundation Building interior in the 70's, continuing with the building of a dormitory on leased land in the 90's, paired with an expensive restoration project to the exterior of the Foundation Building, the construction of the New Academic Building, and further repairs to the interior of the Foundation Building in the 2000's, funded in part by loans from DASNY and MetLife and capital campaigns, paired with lackluster investment portfolio returns and ending with an over-investment in hedge funds – pitched the college's endowment towards real estate and indebtedness and away from cash reserves. In any single year, 30% to 40% of alumni contributed to the college – an outstanding percentage – with 70% to 80% contributing in any three-year period. Then the college changed its own accounting and pushed sizeable alumni gifts and building fundraising out of its alumni percentages. For a decade, while 30% of alumni were supposedly giving less than \$2M per year to the college, they were, in fact, giving nearly \$6M per year. Bottom line: the bulk of the current financial crisis can be traced back to the crash of 2008, with the rest dating back to only 2003. This is why, in 2008 and 2009, the college was bragging about a balanced budget, a shrewd Chrysler Building rent deal, and claiming its hedge fund losses were not as severe as other colleges. But the Great Recession hit on simultaneous fronts, reducing capital campaign giving and

delaying construction at 51 Astor Place. The “rising cost of higher education” in the past decade is demonstrably a bloated administration and the indebtedness for the unnecessary building boom that the college invested its resources in. Reminding baby boomers about Green Camp and the Physics Department is a diversionary tactic.

As Free As Air And Water

Administration

Peter Cooper wanted a free political science department
The Cooper Union was only free since 1902
There was tuition at Cooper from its founding
Andrew Carnegie kept Cooper free for a century

Free Cooper Union

Cooper’s free education policy has landmark status
The “amateur” students weren’t degree-seeking students
“Amateurs” were phased out by 1887
Why won’t Bloomberg or Gates give to the college?

Where the truth lies: The administration is using half-truths, which can make fact-checking look like nitpicking. Although it is true that the charter only explicitly says that the first two parts of The Cooper Union – the reading room and the night lectures in politics – be free, the other two parts – the art and engineering schools – were also intended to be completely “gratuitous,” and were in ways that would completely surprise a modern audience. Female students in the art day school not only paid nothing for lectures and supplies, but even earned money while their work was supervised. Similarly, male art students and female and male engineering students at night did not pay for lectures or supplies, although engineering books were sold at cost. “Amateur” female art students did attend at the founding, although their number was limited to a tenth of the school, then reduced to a single afternoon class, and phased out in 1887, although they seem to have returned in the following century. The fixation on the 1902 date is strange, as Peter Cooper single-handedly funded the college until his death in 1883, then his son and son-in-law made large financial contributions, then Andrew Carnegie gave a large gift that enabled the college to use its entire space for classes. 1902 was the date of Carnegie’s second gift, which enabled the college to open an additional engineering day school. Peter Cooper’s son and son-in-law matched the two gifts that year, as well, and a third thing happened in 1902, also: the first alumnus contribution. The administration is so fixated on 1902 because it is the first public record of Peter Cooper’s “as free as air and water” quote, which the administration wants to claim is not in the charter. Of course, “open and free to all” is. Peter’s son and son-in-law were both New York City mayors (albeit, at a time when being mayor was almost an honorary position, with all power in the wards), and the assignment of property taxes to the college for the Chrysler Building land was a sign of the political esteem that the free reading room, the Great Hall, the Cooper Institute, and its mayors held (Peter Cooper was only held in esteem by the lower classes, his abolitionist, anti-bank and anti-gold standard views were not so popular among the bourgeoisie).

Equal to the Best

Administration

Can’t have both merit scholarships and academic excellence
If a family can afford to pay 24% tuition, why shouldn’t they?
We run a lean ship, we need revenue

Free Cooper Union

The financial crisis can be averted without any reductions in academics
The merit scholarship defines the college and makes it unique
Cooper needs expense reduction

Where the truth lies: There has been some give-and-take from the administration on these philosophical points. Originally, only a Revenue Task Force was announced, then it was pluralized and an Expense Reduction Task Force was formed. Simultaneously, a Cooper Union Task Force that resulted in *The Way Forward* was created and published, which has been treated with benign neglect by the administration. The Board of Trustees demanded a large budget cut, but the Expense Reduction Task Force was provided with

numbers that made academics take a big hit. Then came the hybrid framework and Responsibility Centered Management, accompanied by delayed union negotiations. The one fact that everyone is ignoring is that a faculty member – adjunct or full-time – at Cooper gets paid just as much as a faculty member at any other college. The academic excellence comes from the pace of the courses, packing over 50% more content into every course. Why the Cooper president should be in the top 10 – not top 10% - of college president salaries is a different question. Why the trustees now need their own full-time secretary, and why many other administrative positions were changed from clerical to skilled, is also important. And what ever happened to the external consultant report on administrative structure promised in the Presidential Address of December 2011? But, getting back to the subject, the excellence of the education was always a matter of its curriculum and standards, which, in its early years, led to a low graduation rate. In that context, the introduction of the merit admission policy in 1915 – for its first 55 years, admission to Cooper was limited but on a first-come first-served basis – made sense from an efficiency viewpoint. The selectiveness of the college was never its selling point – “as free as air and water” dominated all marketing materials for decades. With tales of City College fresh in many New Yorkers’ minds, the Cooper Union Community is justified in believing that a change in the scholarship policy will lead to a slow – or even rapid - decline in the educational quality of the school – the one thing the administration believes it wants to preserve.

Sustaining the Mission

Administration

The Cooper Union invented continuing education
Fee-based pre- and post-undergraduate programs are the solution
Reinventing the institution into an honors college with guaranteed access for the lower classes is the only sustainable model

Free Cooper Union

Student debt is leading students away from higher education
Other institutions should follow Cooper, not the other way around
The country needs more free education, not less

Where the truth lies: First off, the administration attempt to re-write the college’s history is simply offensive. Prior to 1901, there was no day-time engineering school. The Cooper Union invented the night college, not continuing education, which has a completely different meaning today. It is simply bizarre that in 2004 the college could tell its alumni that it took nearly a century and a half, but The Cooper Union was finally offering adult education certificate programs, and then, in 2011, start claiming that Cooper had invented it back in 1859. Consider the launch of those programs in 2004 a trial balloon. Then came a proposed for-pay architecture graduate program. Now the free Saturday Program is on the chopping block, and the college dreams of expanded post-graduate programs. The disconnect between the Cooper Union Community and the administration is most severe on this final point. Nearly 4,000 people signed an on-line petition opposing tuition at Cooper. The Alumni Council has twice voted unanimously to keep Cooper tuition-free. The full-time engineering faculty voted 14 to 14 on a tuition reduction proposal, then defeated it 14 to 13. The art faculty voted it down completely, rejecting new “satellite programs” as well. The engineering student representatives hedged their bets by supporting free education while also saying they trusted the engineering faculty, while the art students joined forces with Occupy Student Debt and held a series of protest actions that culminated in a day of solidarity, with messages of support pouring in from around the city, the country, and the world. Publications in the art world have followed the art students and faculty, along with local bloggers, the Huffington Post, and the Rachel Maddow show. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* have been suspiciously silent, although they are preparing stories. The cultural landscape is changing, as more middle class families identify as working class. President Obama announced a new college rating system in his 2013 State of the Union address which is sure to put The Cooper Union at the top of the list. Rather than leading The Cooper Union into the 21st century, the administration appears to be on the wrong side of all higher education trends. It is hard to believe that the Middle States Association will believe that the administration followed a coherent “process” in arriving at a decision to change the scholarship policy of the college. Calls for the

resignation of the president have become more strident, but it is the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees which appears to be even more out of touch.

Will the entire Board meet with the Cooper Union Community on March 1, 2013, or just some members of the Executive Committee? How can two groups telling such divergent tales hope to accomplish anything by a dialogue? The administration arms itself with “facts,” Free Cooper Union arms itself with rhetoric. Will truthiness win over truth?

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