

The Pioneer

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April 23, 2013: The Day Cooper Charged Tuition

JOSEPH COLONEL (EE '15) & MARCUS MICHELEN (BSE'14)

At 6:05 AM on April 23rd 2013, members of the Cooper Community received a campus-notice email from Mark Epstein, Chairman of the Cooper Union Board of Trustees. The email was an invitation to an event at noon the same day, hosted by the Board of Trustees. According to the email, the event would "announce the decisions the Board reached on the future course of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art." The 61-word email closed with a requirement: "No signs or banners please."

At the event itself, a lone podium stood before a packed Great Hall. At about ten minutes past noon, Mark Epstein walked in, and took his place behind the podium. He quietly read a written statement from the Board of Trustees: "The Board of Trustees voted last week to reduce the full-tuition scholarship to 50% for all undergraduates admitted to The Cooper Union beginning with the class entering in the fall of 2014."

"No, you are not getting a swimming pool."

He continued for approximately 15 more minutes, finishing the written statement that was subsequently emailed to the Cooper Community at 12:23 PM. Epstein then opened the floor for questions. However, instead of receiving questions verbally, Epstein insisted on receiving questions in writing. Men and women with large index cards walked around the Great Hall offering the cards to those who wanted to ask questions.

In order for one to ask a question, he or she needed to raise his or her hand, receive an index card, write down the question and

give the card back to the carriers. The carrier would then give the index card to Epstein, who would put the card into a pile of questions to answer. As Epstein attempted to answer many of the questions, he ignored duplicates and questions he deemed antagonistic, as more questions came in.

"We would probably need a minimum of at least 300 to 400 million dollars [to avoid the consideration of charging tuition.]"

A few of the questions along with Epstein's answers are reproduced below:

Cooper Community: "To avoid the consideration of charging tuition, how many millions of dollars would The Cooper Union need?"

Mark Epstein: "We would probably need a minimum of at least 300 to 400 million dollars."

CC: [Question unknown]

ME: "No, you are not getting a swimming pool."

CC: "What will stop an inflation [related] increase of the 50% [tuition]."

ME: "If you all would donate to this school, that will stop."

CC: "This format of asking questions is insulting."

ME: "Maybe so. Being yelled at, like the last meeting, was offensive so we're trying to keep it civil."

According to student Natalia Maliga, a walk-out was planned on Facebook, beginning a little after 2 PM. Beginning outside of the foundation building, the student-protestors entered 41 Cooper Square at approximately 3:30. The students walk up the Grand Staircase and stopped at the top the stairs, just outside of Frankie's lounge, chanting "Free as air and water!"

The group of students then began screaming and banging on the floor and walls of the school, attempting to get the attention of complacent engineers scattered throughout the building. The student-protestors went up to the 8th floor, calling for a unified school the entire way.

The movement walked back down to the 4th floor and stopped in front of Frankie's lounge, releasing another collective scream, reported to have been heard in the Rose Auditorium. The protesting continued outside of the foundation building for quite some time afterwards.

"Being yelled at, like the last meeting, was offensive so we're trying to keep it civil."

Near the end of the night, starting at 7:30 PM, a candle-light vigil with a small bonfire was held outside of the foundation building. Students of all three schools sat and stood around the fire sharing memories of their experiences at Cooper. The vigil ended when police peacefully asked the students to put out the bonfire. A student poured out the fire with sand from a fellow student's show.

Two Takes on Today's Events by Pioneer Staff

MARCUS MICHELEN (BSE'14)

As nearly every student here would say, I distinctly remember when I found out that I got accepted to Cooper. I was working on a presentation for Macroeconomics with my two closest friends and my mom called me. When she told me the news, I nearly collapsed to the floor. My friends thought that someone in my family had died. When I finally got myself together and told them what happened, they were ecstatic. They knew how much this meant to me, how I had wanted this more than anything else, how it felt like it would be the single greatest day of my life.

I never knew why I wanted to go to Cooper. In middle school, I dreamt of being an architect but, more importantly, studying at Cooper. As I got older and entered high school, I realized I wasn't talented enough to be get into Cooper for architecture. I put any and all of my architecture dreams on hold: in order to go to the Cooper Union, I had to be an engineer. I wanted - I needed - to come here. I needed to come here.

There was a mystique, an aura surrounding the school in my mind, one I never bothered to contemplate until recently. It wasn't exactly the free tuition that made me so enamored with the school, but nearly everything I idolized about Cooper can be seen as a direct result of the free tuition.

I'm reminded of Alexander Sokurov's film *Russian Ark*. The film covers over 300 years of Russian history, yet consists of a single 96-minute long Steadicam shot. No one would ever argue that the single-shot structure of the film is what makes it so appealing, yet this superficially interesting constraint is responsible for nearly all of the charms of the film. In other words, a constraint with a superficial appeal sometimes nurtures lasting and deeper positive qualities.

For Cooper, the superficially appealing constraint was the full-tuition scholarship. It's certainly tempting to go to school for free, but that can't be the only reason to go to the school. The scholarship yielded many qualities that I desired, in retrospect: the school couldn't afford too many scholarships each year, so the school remained a very small, tight-knit community; students weren't treated as customers and, thus, were required to genuinely work and learn for their degree; the school was insanely competitive, giving Cooper an aura of exclusivity.

Cooper was the type of school that could take something that Mark Epstein would see as "icing on the cake" and transform it into the foundation of a mythic place of obscure charm and mystique. It seemed like magic to me.

Now that the school has decided to charge tuition, starting with the incoming class in fall of 2014, the world has finally seen the smoke and mirrors behind the magic trick that was Cooper Union. In the years I've spent at Cooper Union, I've grown up significantly:

During this time of my life, I started drinking coffee, I held a 40-hour a week job, I started monitoring my cholesterol, I was rejected from a job for the first time, and I had a job that I was specifically trained to do.

I came to accept that change probably won't happen, that when someone's neck is on the line, they will not innovate.

I had my first serious relationship, I learned to deal with failure, and I learned to treasure true success. My youthful high school ego, the one that got me into Cooper, was cut down by students far smarter than I will ever hope to be.

Perhaps most importantly, I stopped believing in magic.

JOSEPH COLONEL (EE'15)

He had lived through so much to get to that day, the day he learned he had been accepted to The Cooper Union. His friends all congratulated him, his parents congratulated him, the strangers that his parents had told congratulated him. His English teacher convinced him to accept the full tuition scholarship: there was no better place to get an engineering undergraduate education in the country. The college would suit him: a college in an urban environment – the Village, no less –; a small college, with a small student to faculty ratio; a college close to home, less than an hour from his birthplace.

"And, it's free."

He didn't even realize how lucky he was, he was told. His parents had really hit the lottery, he was told. Such a selective school... he must be so grateful, he was told. He would be an anomaly among his peers – he would not receive a debt totaling six figures attached to his diploma.

...

He sits in the Great Hall, five rows away from Mark Epstein, directly opposite the shorter than average man. The human twenty feet in front of him cannot control its presence in the Great Hall. The multitude occupying the seats of that hallowed speaking ground bore holes into Epstein's face with their intent. Jiggling legs, nervous laughs, idle conversations that no one cares about, abnormally heavy breathing, thinking, hoping, praying, and sweating all fill the room with their cacophony. Two years of deliberations, two years of disagreements, two years of time, two years of the occasional sleepless night contemplating this miserable day...

"...Subsequently, the Board of Trustees voted last week to reduce the full-tuition scholarship to 50% for all undergraduates admitted to The Cooper Union beginning with the class entering in the fall of 2014."

It continues. No one rushes the podium. No one sets themselves on fire. No one sets off the bomb carefully attached to their chest, concealed under their clothes. Feedback eclipses Epstein's processed, barely amplified voice. It continues to continue.

The spectators write their questions on sheets of paper that get brought up to Epstein. He flips through some, disregards others. A girl walks up to the podium and puts her question on Epstein's podium. She taps the sheet of paper twice, then walks back to her seat. A boy places a scroll on Epstein's podium that is promptly ignored by no one but Epstein. The spectators cheer for some questions, laugh at some answers. Emotions flare, piercing the silence Epstein tends as he reads.

He has never felt more alone in his life.

He will worry about planning his senior project. He will have experienced four years of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. A baby faced young person will be lost within the steel façade of 41 Cooper Square, searching for a classroom, or food, or an event. He will approach the young individual. The young individual will turn, and he will look into the eyes of the Class of 2018. And he will be lucky.

If you'd like to further discuss either of these op-eds feel free to email michel@cooper.edu