INTERVIEW WITH DEVORA NAJJAR (CHE ’16), STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The Cooper Pioneer sat down with Devora Najjar (CHE ’16) to discuss her role as the Student Representative to the Board of Trustees.

The Cooper Pioneer: How many Board of Trustee meetings have you attended so far?

Devora Najjar: Two plus one over the phone. That wasn’t an official meeting, but it was where they actually decided on tuition.

TCP: When were these meetings?

DN: First one was December 9th. The official meetings are Wednesdays. The impromptu meeting was a Friday—January 10th. The one in March was mid-March, March 12th. There are four scheduled Trustee meetings a year—March, June, September, December.

TCP: Can you describe the atmosphere of these meetings?

DN: The first one I was super scared about because I had no idea what it was going to be like and I was pretty convinced that it was just an appearance. I thought, “okay, I’m going to get there and just sit around and they’re going to do their business.” But then I got in there and everyone was all really welcoming and genuinely excited about the position.

The head of the table was Francois [de Menil, the Vice Chairman], Jashodh [Bharucha], Mark [Epstein, Chair Emeritus], Richard [Lancy, Chairman of the Board], and me. I was right up next to Rich, who moderates the conversation because he’s the chairman. He let me speak whenever I wanted to, which was really cool. I didn’t think I was going to have that ability.

I had no idea how to prepare for the meetings. I knew we were going to talk about tuition, but as much as I prepared for it you can’t prepare a thing you’re going to say. You don’t know how the conversation is going to go—what questions they’re going to ask you, what aspects they’re going to focus on—but it was really cool because in the middle they said “what about the students….” And I was like “Hey! Gurus what! I am a student, so I can try and let you know what they would think!” I really had the ability to actually be a voice for students.

TCP: How long were they generally?

DN: The meetings typically went from 8:30 in the morning to 1:30 in the afternoon. There is the general meeting with the board along with any outside parties that were called in to speak or for consultations on matters and such, then they have executive meetings with the board and the president and then an executive meeting without president. These parts of the meetings are generally to discuss matters that can be discussed in the general meeting because of a conflict of interest or sensitivity of the material being discussed.

TCP: Were you comfortable at the meetings? I.e. did you feel that other members of the board respected your opinion?

DN: Yeah—it was interesting, one of the questions they asked me in the interview was something like “So do you feel intimidated by old men?” And even though there were a lot of things wrong with that question and I was kind of confused by it at first, after being in the first meeting I realized that it is such a legitimate question in the sense that it really is important that the student rep is totally comfortable speaking to the board members. I’m not scared to say “ok, can you clarify your statement because I don’t understand this vague thing.” I’m not afraid to make a statement for the students to the board that I know they might not want to hear. In terms of feedback from the board members after the first meeting, the most frequent comment I got from them was “I was so impressed with your speaking. You were so level headed when you were talking. You are so brave to be doing this.” And I was pretty satisfied with that response because I was so scared that I would mess up saying something or I wouldn’t be clear enough or something would slip out, and the board members would just write me off. And Kevin Stein (Art ’95) called me a rockstar, which may or may not be one of the highlights of my life. (continued on back)
It was really important for me to be involved with something I respected, because if they didn’t want to listen to my opinion or think I was someone they were comfortable to approach for a discussion, it would invalidate the whole point of the open forum group in the first place.

TCP: What is your affiliation with Free Cooper?
DN: I joined Free Cooper in December 2012 after the first lock-in, where I started seeing the artists attacking Jumshed one day and I was so furious. I thought, “What the hell is going on here? I didn’t do that to him. Obviously it’s not his fault – this is not the financial mess he got us in.” But I had friends in the art school that told me to come to a [Free Cooper] meeting and see what it’s about. I loved this school and even if I didn’t know if I loved the way they were going about it, I didn’t want to “fight” with the people fighting for it. So I went to a meeting. Then I went to more meetings. I got more involved with the movement and found out things I never knew. I got a lot of new and interesting information on the issue, which helped me get a really great broad picture of everything that happened and what was going to happen next. I made a ton of new friends from different parts of all the school. I learned a lot about myself and different actions in general, group dynamics, and safe spaces – all things that are good to know just being a human being in the world. Proper group building and the kinds of things they’re teaching you in CONNECT workshops.

It was really clear to me that the kind of thing that was going on was about fighting for this school and Peter Cooper’s legacy and for the political and social impor-
tation. And that was something I believed in strongly.

TCP: This has been the most surprising thing you’ve learned (which you can share with us) during one of these meetings?
DN: Their lunches aren’t so fancy – they’re just sandwiches and pasta salad and salad.

TCP: What other meetings did you go to in order to speak about the Board of Trustees meetings?
DN: I had one meeting in which I spoke before the Board [of Trustees] meeting. I also met with all the student representatives beforehand to see if anyone could see me to make sure I had people’s ideas and thoughts on things and what they wanted to express, what they wouldn’t negotiate for, what they would be willing to cut, what they wouldn’t be willing to cut. Because there was no way to guess for sure where the conversation would go, I wanted to have all of my bases covered.

Since the first board meeting, I’ve been going to the Joint Student Council meetings to hear what’s up with them and also to let them know what was going on the other end of things as well as going to individual student council meetings. Especially after the first board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students’ meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn [‡ continued from front] speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn [‡ continued from front] speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: What does your feeling about students meeting the board posi-
tion mean to you?
DN: It means a lot to me because I knew that if they didn’t want to listen to me they had to go to their source of information, which was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.

TCP: How do you feel about students meeting the board posi-
tion?
DN: It’s funny because I wasn’t even going to run into that before, but with DeV onn speaking before the second board meeting I held another forum for the students to talk about what happened at the meeting, get a sense of the student sentiment toward everything that was going on, and then I knew what was important to the student at this point in time so I could present that to the trustees.
On Sunday, April 13th, 2014, The Cooper Union Alumni Association held The Peter Cooper Block Party for Founder’s Day 2014. The event occurred in two sessions, the first being The Awards Ceremony from 10:00 PM to 1:00 PM in the Great Hall. During this time, The Cooper Union Alumni Association presented awards that honored alumni achievements in art, architecture, and engineering, amongst other recognitions of service and dedication. The year award recipients were the following: 

- Jay Moskowitz (Phy ’80), for the Evans Dunn Award for Engineering
- Julian Lavender (Art ’93) and Augusta Savage (Art ’25) for the Augustus Saint-Gaudens Award for Art
- Leslie Gill (A’82), for the John Q. Heylisk Award for Architecture
- Patricia Bockley Moss (Art ’55), for the Peter Cooper Public Service Award
- Sean Cauzick (BSE ’98), for the Almumns of the Year Award

In addition: 
- Henry Chapman (Art ’16), Alexis Lenza (CE ’05) and Victoria Sobel (Art ’15) were recognized as the Young Alumni of the Year.
- Special Recognition for Extraordinary Service was given to Barry Douglas EE ’83/MEE ’86, Michael Borkowsky (ME ’81), and Jeffery Gural.

Following the Awards Ceremony was the Street Fair on Astor Place between Broadway and Lafayette from 10:00 PM to 5:00 PM. The Street Fair featured a variety of activities, food stands, and games booths. Among these was the Inventor’s Row, a series of booths that presented the works of modern day inventors. At 2:30 PM, these inventors took part in an Inventor’s Panel where they discussed the process of invention and innovation. Amidst all of the activity on Astor Place, The CooperNova Dance Team, and the Daddy Long Legs Blues Band performed on the Jeff Graul Stage. At 3:00 PM, The Peter Cooper Jello Challenge was held and the Street Fair event concluded with the Trifulightful Raffle Drawing at 4:00 PM.

During Cooper Union’s spring break, President Blanchnas, Dean Dahlberg, and Professor Tzavelis traveled to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay. The Cooper Union and IIT Bombay are starting a new student-exchange program. The purpose of the trip was to enable Cooper faculty to get to know the IIT Bombay faculty and students as well as to see their campus.

I asked Dean Dahlberg how it felt to travel to India as a group representing Cooper: “It was fun traveling as a group that represented Cooper… an IIT Bombay alum, Ron Mehta traveled with us. Ron is a generous sponsor who will provide travel support for both Cooper and IIT Bombay exchange students in the first year of the program. It was fun having Ron show us around his alma mater and reminisce about his time as an undergraduate at IIT Bombay. Everyone at IIT Bombay treated us very well. They were very curious about the environment at Cooper Union and in New York City. Our guides showed us classroom, labs, student housing and cafeteria. They have a lot of space and equipment. They have an impressive incubator that houses student startup companies. They just opened up a tinker’s space. We invited them to participate in the awarding of students who won an app-development contest.”

Her favorite memory of the trip was touring the Akash project where the Indian government is sponsoring the development of a $49 tablet computer called Akash. The university houses a group of developers to meet India’s goal to educate hundreds of thousands of software professionals. Dean Dahlberg also enjoyed meeting with IIT Bombay students interested in visiting Cooper. She comments that in India “high school students must take a rigorous entrance exam to get into college. The IIT Bombay engineering programs admits only the top students from the over 500,000 students who take the required college entrance exam. The students are incredibly smart, hardworking and ambitious. They remind me of Cooper students!”

Professor Tzavelis noticed that the IIT students are all happy with the student activities. He was also impressed with their labs. “Their labs are much bigger than our labs…They had some old equipment but also the latest equipment — we even visited a nanotech lab which was state of the art. For civil engineering, they had the latest equipment like the ones we have. Their labs were 10 times bigger than ours!”

The most apparent difference between Cooper and IIT is the student body size. At IIT, labs classes consist of 150-200 students. On the other hand, Professor Tzavelis noted that a major similarity between Cooper and IIT is the high caliber of students in both schools. He was impressed by IIT students working very hard in groups just like the way students work at Cooper.

The greatest incentive to study abroad is having the chance to travel to a different country and experience the way of life in an entirely different environment. Professor Tzavelis strongly recommends that Cooper students — especially those who have never traveled out of the U.S. — go visit IIT and see how people live outside of America. “This can be a life-changing experience. It can motivate the student to do more for the society and for their profession. I strongly recommend that students go there for a semester.”

The deadline for the study abroad application has passed, but if you are interested in studying abroad to IIT and have not had the chance to check out the program, follow this link: http://cooper.edu/engineering/global-studiea/semester-exchange.
CULTURE SHOW 2014: COOPER HUMOR

YARA ELBOROLOSY (CE '14)

For a small school, Cooper happens to have a diverse community, and the Culture Show, run by SAS (South Asian Society), is a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate this. On April 5, 2014, the Great Hall was filled with over a hundred people waiting to see their friends and classmates perform. With the hosts giving a little skit in between each of the acts, the audience was kept entertained throughout. The acts were amazing as usual, demonstrating not just the culture but the talent of the Cooper Union student body. There were several vocal acts, showcasing the beautiful voices of the students. Gospel Choir, started a couple of years ago, sang a couple of very inspirational songs with beautiful soulful voices. Peter Morfe (EE '16) did a solo act, singing very graciously as usual and so did Ethan Luterman (EE '14), who sang and played the guitar. A few of the members of Coopertones did a Disney Medley, singing some very popular songs from Disney movies such as Reflection from Mulan and A Whole New World from Aladdin. Sons of Pitches, four males from Coopertones, sang together for the last time in their Cooper career and they sang as beautifully as always. Coopertones was the last vocal act, singing several heart-warming songs and had the audience very pleased. The Cooper Union Dramatic Society was also involved and they gave a wonderful preview filled with great acting of their upcoming play, Figaro, which is showing next week. Yo-Yo club also performed, using glow in the dark yoyos to start off their act, which had the audience in awe and ending with various cool tricks. The show ended with group dance, which had so many people that both the stage and the space in front of the stage were used. Their beautiful costumes, great music, and interesting dances was the best way to end the night. But the show wasn’t over, as SAS played a video dedicated to the Senior Class who helped them put the show together along the way. There were shirts being sold to help raise money for the costumes for the show and a lot of delicious Indian food served for free at the end of it. If you missed the culture show this year, make sure you get a chance to attend it next year.

Photo Credit: Howie Chen (EE '16)