

New York City's Cooper Union to begin charging tuition for graduate students

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After more than a century as a tuition-free institution of higher learning, the world-famous Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art will begin charging tuition for its graduate students in 2013.

The announcement was made late last month, about six months after the school's president warned that tuition was inevitable in light of Cooper Union's growing deficit, estimated this year at \$16.5 million.

Cooper Union president Jamshed Bharucha, in his first year as head of the institution, made clear that the supposed compromise, which still maintains free tuition for undergraduates, was undoubtedly not the last word on the subject. "There are risks for this strategy, and there are those who worry if it will work," he said in an interview with the *New York Times*.

Cooper Union, located in lower Manhattan, grants undergraduate degrees in fine art, architecture and engineering. With 1,000 undergraduates and about 200 graduate students, it is one of the most selective and sought-after schools in its fields. Under a policy first adopted in 1902, all those admitted are granted full scholarships, today amounting to \$37,500 annually.

The school has been almost unique among institutions of higher learning in the United States in its maintenance of free tuition. Among the few that also offer free tuition are the small liberal arts institution in Kentucky, Berea College, and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Berea College and Cooper Union were founded within five years of one another, Berea in 1855 and Cooper Union in 1859, in the decade preceding the Civil War. Significantly, both were founded by abolitionists explicitly dedicated to a vision of social equality and low-cost education. Peter Cooper, the founder of Cooper Union, was a self-made industrialist, an inventor and philanthropist. Free tuition was

established at Cooper Union some forty years after its founding, partly based on the bequest of its wealthy founder, who died in 1883 at the age of 92. Among some of the school's famous graduates are architect Daniel Libeskind, artist Hans Haacke and photographer Roy DeCarava.

Less than a year after the Cooper Union building was dedicated, its Great Hall was the site of Abraham Lincoln's famous February 1860 speech that led directly to his nomination for president a few months later. The Great Hall has been the scene of numerous debates and public events in the past 150 years.

Cooper Union has already witnessed several rounds of budget cuts and the latest proposal includes an additional 7 percent cut in its operating budget for next year. That will cover about \$4 million of its projected deficit, and the tuition for incoming graduate students is expected to cover most of the remainder. The deficit is projected to grow to \$20 million or more in the next few years.

President Bharucha said there was a "silent majority who are highly supportive of a plan that energizes the institution." He did not explain why they chose to remain silent. Most students and many faculty have expressed angry opposition. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted one student, 21-year-old junior Aaron Graham, saying that tuition "will destroy the ideology of the whole school." A graduate student who said he enrolled in the chemical engineering graduate program after receiving his undergraduate degree at Cooper Union but being unable to find a job, said the administration was "being sneaky" by limiting its action to graduate programs while still advertising itself as a free institution.

The Cooper Union move represents a chipping away at what little remains of the conception of free higher

education. Free tuition at New York's City University is a distant memory, having been abolished in the 1970s after 125 years. Public higher education is facing devastating budget cuts, most drastically in the California system, but almost everywhere else as well. Meanwhile three-quarters of today's college students who emerge with four-year degrees also owe tens of thousands of dollars and often far more in student loans. Cooper Union students can now look forward to joining these millions of young people who are forced to pay hundreds of dollars a month for the foreseeable future to pay off student loan debt.

As is typically the case, Cooper Union's deficits are being ascribed to mismanagement and other woes, while ignoring the fundamental issue: the development of the "corporate model" in education. The logic of the capitalist market has meant the unleashing of the most destructive forces in this and other previously non-profit sectors of economic life.

Another and much larger expression of this is unfolding just a half-mile away from Cooper Union, at New York University. This sprawling institution, with almost 20,000 undergraduates and nearly 50,000 in the student body as a whole, is seeking permission from the City Planning Commission and other authorities for a vast new expansion that will have a drastic effect on its surrounding neighborhood. Twenty-three faculty departments at NYU have passed nearly-unanimous resolutions opposing the plan, which is based on taking on billions of dollars in new debt that incoming students will be expected to pay off through increased tuition costs.

The consequences of these and similar developments will mean that universities will increasingly choose their students based on ability to pay, a trend that is already noticeable at many elite institutions. Higher education, already severely affected by growing inequality and social polarization, will be unrecognizable compared to the past. This threat to education is increasingly demonstrating to young people that the profit system is a threat to their own futures.



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