

COOPER UNION HSS PROTEST: DECOLONIZE OUR CURRICULA

OCTOBER 29 2018
ROSE AUDITORIUM

This is a silent protest.

Please respect that.

If you would like to support us, please join us
in solidarity on the stage.

Thank you.

“Decolonising the curriculum is, first of all, the acceptance that education, literary or otherwise, needs to enable self-understanding. This is particularly important to people not used to seeing themselves reflected in the mirror of conventional learning. Knowledge and culture is collectively produced and these groups, which intersect in different ways, have as much right as elite white men to understand what their own role has been in forging artistic and intellectual achievements.”

To decolonise and not just diversify curriculums is to recognise that knowledge is inevitably marked by power relations. In a society still shaped by a long colonial history in which white upper-class [cis] men are at the top of the social order, most disciplines give disproportionate prominence to the experiences, concerns and achievements of this one group.

- Dr. Priyamvada Gopal, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge

Source : “Yes, we must decolonise: our teaching has to go beyond elite white men” via [guardian.com](https://www.guardian.com) (reading provided)

Student Testimonials

“I felt so uncomfortable in Maren Stange’s HSS1 class. She was very hostile to us for no reason. She would constantly talk about her black husband as justification for her authority on the black experience. Everyone in the class dreaded going. It was a terrible freshman experience. Another important aspect of the class was that there was one black student who was constantly asked to talk about her experience and they expressed being uncomfortable with this. One time Maren Stange said “for all we know I could be black”. She spoke about histories of racism with no sensitivity”

“In Maren Stange’s HSS1 class during the fall of 2016, on the subject of Kate Chopin’s *Désirée’s Baby*, she alluded and then explicitly referred to the fact that she can talk and lecture about the black experience because of the fact that she had a black husband. She was also consistently hostile during class when the answers to her questions were not the ones she expected, making everyone in class rather uncomfortable”

“In Pospisil’s class, and the Sophomore HSS3 & 4 curriculum, was a completely inadequate and incompetent teacher that if any provided to be a detriment to my learning experience. I addressed it to Sonya Sayres and I was told that she was going to address it but in fact understood that she could not do anything due to the structure of the bureaucracy of the adjunct - faculty structure. To have a teacher that may be adequate to research but does not know how to even make eye contact with a student is someone who should not be providing a higher education class, especially in a place where I found that I was not prioritized”

“Sayres has...attempted...to diversify the curriculum some time ago. In HSS2 we are required to read books about Native peoples in the Americas as well as ancient Chinese societies, but they were written from a European perspective and treated as the “other.” During her lectures she *tried* (I guess) to present herself as socially aware about issues such as racial segregation and colonialism, but everything she says with her tone sounds disingenuous, high-and-mighty, and comes off as honest-to-God bullshit. I don’t believe the faculty are even equipped to diversify the curriculum as, if there were more diverse courses and curricula added, the problematic faculty would teach it in a way that does none of it justice.”

“In HSS1 freshman year we were reading a play out loud, and the part i was reading said the n word, so naturally i stopped. Professor Swann started yelling about how it’s a historical word and i have to say it. He would not move on until I said it. I was really uncomfortable and afraid of him so i did and i felt really bad about it, as there were a few black kids in my class.”

“After taking Sayres for HSS 2, I failed her class. Her teaching skills do not encourage students to participate. Instead, she often ignores when students question her arguments and settles for her own opinions. This kind of environment made me shut off in class and made it difficult for me to keep going, and keep up with the work. As a student who doesn’t have a strong entry point into academia, it was difficult for me to keep up with readings, conversations and essays. This is not the kind of learning environment that I come from. This year I have professor casper. He inhabits the classroom like a dictator and doesn’t seem to understand or value when women speak. I am worried about failing this class, and often feel uncomfortable expressing myself because of how he speaks about history. He also has shamed me for coming in late which I find unfair. HSS is a requirement but the work we are given takes away from our studio classes and also does not inform our art practice, although we would like it to.”

“As someone who has tried to go through the preexisting routes to change HSS, I feel that I am ignored and not taken seriously. During the HSS curriculum committee meetings students are talked over and completely ignored. If we disagree with something, the professors sitting on the committee will rarely address it in a constructive way. Sayres will openly cut off people in the meetings, and talk over students. She only cares about following the ‘rules’, unless she has something to say that she deems more important. The students on the committee are referred to by the school they are in and not their names, and its a dehumanizing experience. I leave every meeting feeling frustrated and walked on. The methods of change that exist now are not working and will continue to not work while the people in charge are still here.”

“Swann didn’t follow the curriculum at all which was good in some ways i think because we read a lot more diverse work like Dutchman and fires in the mirror that dealt with race and religion relations and were not just by a bunch of white people asserting their opinions and only that so material wise, we were exposed to a variety of views rather than just a eurocentric frame of mind. The issue [is] with rather the environment that Swann created in the class, since all the readings were plays we spent class time reading them out loud basically acting it out. When reading the plays like the dutchman, he would force us to say the n word which was extremely uncomfortable especially with only one African American in our class, and yes that is what the author who is a black man wrote but that does not make it okay for us to say it. There was even an instance when a girl in my class was refusing to say it and he called her stupid and she left the class crying. It was just really insensitive of him, his argument was that if we didn’t say it it would be censorship and that we needed to say it to fully experience the impact of the word, it’s supposed to make you feel uncomfortable. He ended up siding with us and not forcing us anymore but still stood by his opinion. Another major issue with the class though was the treatment of international students, particularly from Asia. From the first day of class, he was very rude to them..also he would yell at them for mispronouncing words when reading and call them stupid pretty much even take away their parts because he said they were doing so awful”

We, students, at The Cooper Union, do not consent to the standing curricula offered by the Humanities and Social Sciences Department. We do not stand for an education that is solely rooted in reproductions of Western ideology and do not tolerate faculty members who are racially insensitive and thereby, foster an unsafe and unproductive learning environment for all. This has created a negative social climate toward people of color and other marginalized folk.

Following are a list of demands directed to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the larger administrative body, and the faculty and administrative members in the Art, Architecture and Engineering schools at The Cooper Union.

1) TRANSPARENCY

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences release statistical data relating to the enrollment, retention, and performance of students of color in HSS, in relation to other students, for the larger community to make an informed judgement via email by November 9, 2018.

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences meetings (curriculum, faculty) and their corresponding agendas be made open and publicly available to all members of the larger Cooper Union community.

We demand that the Cooper Union administration and the three schools of Art, Architecture and Engineering respond directly to this existing issue and release public statements via email by November 9 2018, directed to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences with an acknowledgement of this issue as well as commit toward working together effectively to realize the resolutions of these issues.

2) HIRING

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences clearly explain the processes and timelines they have set in place for hiring faculty (adjunct, post-doctoral, full-time) and the talent pools from which they have hired existing full-time faculty via email by November 9, 2018.

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences demonstrate and explain clearly the attempts that have been made in the past to attract and retain a more diverse set of faculty via email by November 9, 2018.

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the administrative body work together to realize more effective hiring practices, that will directly impact issues of visibility that are prominent in the current lack of diverse full time faculty in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

We demand that an extensive and comprehensive search begin for a Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences that will replace our existing Acting Dean, Peter Buckley, with effect immediately.

We demand that students be actively integrated into the hiring process through student representation on the Dean search committee, in voices and votes, that at least match those of non-students on the committee.

3) ACCOUNTABILITY

We demand the administrative body of The Cooper Union publicly recognize and acknowledge that existing channels of feedback and complaints are ineffective through the Office of Student Affairs, with specificity to Title IX.

We demand that the Office of Student Affairs run a comprehensive self-study into all of their existing processes and release to the larger Cooper community an open and publicly available report via email by November 9, 2018 that explains what the Office of Student Affairs has learnt from their self-study, where and why they have fallen short and realistic measures on how to improve the effectiveness of their various processes.

We demand that the administrative body, the three schools of Art, Architecture, and Engineering, and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences initiate and continue a conversation about the hiring of an ombudsman, who will serve as a neutral agent outside of The Cooper Union, as a measure of accountability within our community by November 9, 2018.

4) DECOLONIZATION AND RESTRUCTURING

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences acknowledge and recognize its responsibility to students to require them to think outside the bounds of eurocentricity in the design of all its course offerings via email by November 9, 2018.

(<https://flygirlsofcambridge.com/2017/06/14/decolonising-the-english-faculty-an-open-letter/>)

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences publicly commit to creation of curricula that are decolonized. This would mean the effective and meaningful insertion of postcolonial readings and thought alongside existing traditional texts.

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, urgently address and restructure the standing curricula for HSS 1-4, to provide a collective understanding of literature and history that will include non-Western perspectives, via email by November 9, 2018.

We demand that the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences embrace pedagogical practices that allow and stimulate self-understanding in relation to the texts we will read.

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