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The Cooper Union (NY)

Founded in 1859 by inventor/industrialist Peter Cooper, The Cooper Union is one of the more unique US colleges. Based in the East Village of New York City, Cooper Union's educational model has been around for a long time, but it fits quite well with the desires of some of today's best prospective architects, artists and engineers.

It is exceptionally difficult to get admitted to Cooper Union. Across all three of its schools, the acceptance rate was only 13 percent. Overall, about two-thirds of accepted students decide to come, higher than most US colleges, including most of the most selective research universities. For art and architecture the yield rates vary between 85 and 90 percent.

What separates Cooper Union from other schools that host students who are interested in these majors?

- **It is a very small (less than 900 undergraduates and fewer than 100 graduate students) school**, probably smaller than the high schools that many of its students attended. About 40 percent of the undergraduates come from New York, the rest from other states and countries. Outside of New York and neighboring states, California and Florida send the most students to Cooper Union as do Asian nations.
- **The admissions process requires supplements that are not expected of students who are considering other colleges for architecture, art or engineering.** Architects and artists are given faculty-designed tests to assess visual acuity. Engineering students complete a writing supplement and must take SAT Subject Tests in Math (I or II) and either Chemistry or Physics. The purpose of these supplements is for the faculty and admissions staff to find out not only who is truly qualified but also who is "teachable," not over-exposed to technology or technique in their high school education. The materials are creative exercises for students to apply the knowledge they have gathered through their high school education to solve a problem that they have not seen before. This is a good idea, given that the education is more "hands on," and will expose students to challenges that they have not experienced.
- **For the most part, the academic experience is more personal than students might find in a larger school, although it requires students to bond faster to help each other to handle greater rigor.** Only the introductory physics course for engineers has a large enrollment: every first-year engineer, around 125 total, is in the class. Otherwise, you're not likely to see more than 30 students in a class. Students do show high regard for the faculty. They gave them a rating of 3.88 (out of a possible 5.0) on [RateMyProfessors.com](https://www.ratemyprofessors.com). That's not far below the rating that MIT (3.93) students gave their faculty and slightly higher than Rice (3.86) and Columbia (3.80) students gave theirs. These are three of the smaller research universities that offer the same majors as Cooper Union.
- **Because there are few majors, it helps to have a strong commitment to your program in order to stay.** While this does not mean that a graduate in engineering, for example, must become an engineer, s/he must be willing to complete their degree. But those who start usually finish. First-year retention is around 95 percent. Over 80 percent of the art and



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engineering students graduate on time; the rate for architecture varies between 75 and 80 percent annually. The admissions office does an excellent job of finding out who has the commitment to complete the degree.

- **The campus culture is politically liberal. But students are too busy to be activists as they might be at a larger university with a more diverse set of majors.** They are too busy to even interact outside of their academic program. Bachelors degrees in the arts or engineering require over 130 credits, more than most other schools that offer the same professionally accredited majors as Cooper Union does. The architecture degree takes five years to complete.
- **There is really no campus.** The Cooper Union consists of four buildings, the newest opened in 2009 to house modern classrooms, laboratories and study spaces for the engineering programs. The other three buildings are the original Cooper Foundation building, completed in 1859 on its own plaza, the freshman residence hall completed in 1993 and the administrative offices about a half-block away. One plus of the setting: crime on campus is virtually non-existent, according to the school's [Clery Report](#).
- **There is some interesting history.** The Cooper Foundation building was the tallest structure in New York at the time it was completed. The Great Hall, located in the basement, was the venue where Abraham Lincoln was first perceived as a viable candidate for President. It has also hosted intellectuals and movement leaders such as W.E.B DuBois and Susan B. Anthony as well as several presidents since Lincoln, including Barack Obama. Peter Cooper, who founded the school, was, at age 85, the oldest candidate for President in US history. He ran on the Greenback Party ticket in 1876. He was a nationally noted abolitionist as well as a leading advocate for Native American rights as well as one of the leading supporters for national paper money.
- While located in a well-to-do neighborhood of New York City, close to NYU and the New School, **the Cooper Union offers few amenities within the walls of the campus buildings.** There is no student center or dining hall. There are varsity sports but they compete quite regionally against teams in New York City, upstate New York and Connecticut.
- **Students hopefully know from the first day of freshman orientation that they will be expected to find housing from the sophomore year in one of the most expensive rental markets in the country.** This is a community where students should be humble and helpful, to make friends to get through the academic rigor and find roommates to brave the New York City housing market. The school tries to help new students to become better acquainted with New York neighborhoods and alumni through tours and scavenger hunts as well as through clubs and organizations.

What schools compare to The Cooper Union?

It's difficult to identify an American college that is similar to Cooper Union. The Franklin W. Olin School of Engineering, located outside of Boston is somewhat like Cooper Union in offering a hands-on engineering education within a small school. But it also offers coursework in



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collaboration with Babson, a highly selective business school and Wellesley, a more selective liberal arts college. While Cooper Union is part of a library access network with several New York City colleges, its students cannot take courses for degree credit at any of those partner schools.

Students who are interested in engineering are more likely to consider Cooper Union versus smaller, but exceptionally selective engineering schools including Cal Tech, Harvey Mudd and MIT as well as mid-sized and larger research universities such as Columbia or Cornell. Columbia, Cornell and MIT, among others, are among the considered options for prospective architecture students. The Bachelor of Fine Arts program has no similarities versus other visual arts programs because it offers no specific major. Students learn foundations of art and design, then they seek further instruction in the media of their choice.

Is the Cooper Union a good value for the money?

The Cooper Union is one of the best values among US colleges. A first-year student who does not qualify for more than a student loan would expect to have a Total Cost of Attendance —tuition, fees, room, meals and essentials of around \$40,000. Every student receives a “half-scholarship” worth \$21,000 towards tuition. First-year students pay approximately \$1,000 to \$1,100 per month to live in an apartment-style residence hall with 3, 4 and 5-person units that have single and double rooms, quite reasonable for housing in New York City, especially in the East Village.

On average, The Cooper Union met 86 percent of a student’s financial aid in 2015 as determined through analysis of the FAFSA and the CSS Profile. The average student loan indebtedness for 2015 graduates, for students who had to borrow for their education was approximately \$20,400, including architects who need five years to complete the degree. That’s lower than most college students borrow to attend their home state university. About 25 percent of the undergraduate student body qualifies for the Federal Pell Grant, very high for a school with exceptionally competitive admissions. The needier students who come from New York may also qualify for the state’s Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). That makes Cooper Union an even better bargain.

The downside is the costs of housing after the first year. Expect to pay more to live near campus or to cover rent in combination with commuting costs by bus or subway.

Will students find internships and jobs?

Career services are more personalized than architecture, art and engineering students are likely to find at other schools. The rigor of the programs is known to employers not only in New York, but elsewhere. More than 80 firms recruited on campus for engineering students during the fall and spring of the past school year, impressive for a school that graduates about 120 engineers each year. The engineering workload is such that students will not usually intern during the school year, unless it is a part-time extension of a summer internship. Career seminars and panels happen frequently throughout the school year. Job searches for architecture and art graduates are more self directed. Architecture and art students have the opportunity to work in paid internships during their junior and senior years and also receive exposure to New York’s vast non-profit arts community.



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Among the more than 7,900 Cooper Union alumni registered on [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com), over 5,000 live and/or work in and near New York City. Just over 300 are based around San Francisco with more than 200 around Los Angeles and Boston. Although the engineering program graduates two-thirds of a class, art and design graduates represent a larger segment of the alumni base among those who continued in their craft. More impressive: over 1,000 alumni are entrepreneurs. It is relatively easy to bring alumni to campus as well as for students to shadow or meet with them.

Conclusions

Going to Cooper Union for college is much like going to Julliard to study dance, drama or music. Students put the craft above all else and mainly socialize with those who are also ambitious within it. Those who “think that they might want to” be an architect, visual artist or engineer would be better served by a school that offers options outside of the major. Those who believe that their craft is a calling, are ready to tackle city life and want a great value for the money will like Cooper Union.

The Report Card: The Cooper Union

Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: A/A

Freshman Retention: A

Costs: A

Curriculum: A

Community: B+

Comforts: C+

Connections: A