

Boulder's Naropa University celebrates 50th anniversary



Naropa University 50th anniversary decorations are seen on the windows at the school's main campus off Arapahoe Avenue in Boulder on Friday. (Matthew Jonas/Staff Photographer)



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When Naropa University in Boulder was founded 50 years ago, nobody knew what it would become.

Naropa started as an institute offering summer sessions combining Buddhism with Western thought. President Charles Lief was there for the [first session](#) in the summer of 1974. The organizers expected a few hundred people, and instead, more than 1,300 students showed up.

“It was pretty powerful,” Lief said. “It was just an amazing summer and I thought that the seeds were planted. In a way, I’m not surprised, but from time to time I wonder how we got here. We started with nothing.”

Naropa is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year with a year-long celebration that kicked off with the start of the Summer Writing Program in June. [Celebratory events](#) include a 50th-anniversary gala and an alumni reunion weekend this fall.

“It’s really exciting and it’s almost hard to believe that it’s been 50 years,” Naropa Board of Trustees member Mark Wilding said. “It feels like a whirlwind and at the same time there’s so much that’s happened.”

Naropa was established in 1974 by Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa. Some students shared mixed feelings in February about celebrating Trungpa during the 50th anniversary [due to allegations](#) against him, including physical and sexual violence against women and having sex with students.

A Naropa education combines Eastern philosophy and Western scholarship while valuing experiential learning and contemplative practice. Contemplative education at Naropa is a mindfulness practice that includes meditation and yoga inspired by its Buddhist roots.

Wilding first came to Boulder in 1978 to study at Naropa and has since worked as adjunct faculty, staff and in various leadership roles.

“I often told my students that Naropa is not an easy place to study because it demands that you be present and bring your whole self to the situation no matter what’s happening,” Wilding said. “But, I said, the good news is it also demands that of me and the other faculty too.”

“Nobody gets out without being transformed.”



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Naropa was not originally a degree-granting institution. For the first five to seven years, Lief said, Naropa was still very experimental. They didn't know at the time they'd emerge to become a university and considered becoming a retreat center.

After some time, it was clear the motivation was to move to being a recognizable institution of higher education. In 1986, Naropa received full accreditation. The name changed from Naropa Institute to Naropa University in 1999.

"When we ultimately became accredited and started delivering degrees and so forth, that was a big shift," Wilding said.

Regina Smith, Naropa's vice president for mission, culture and inclusive community, said Naropa trains students to be more compassionate.

"I think Naropa is definitely a place deserving of celebration," Smith said. "I believe that as an institute, it brings a lot of needed healing and hope and compassion to a world that is suffering."

To continue as a university, Lief said Naropa needs to be "innovative and entrepreneurial." About 70% of all Naropa students are transfers, and Lief said it will be important to find new ways to continue to support those students.

“In the case of Naropa, people find us because other things have not worked as well,” Lief said. “And so we pay a lot of attention and have a lot of respect for the fact that we have an obligation to those students to honor what brought them here”

Another big shift is Naropa’s move to online learning. The university was 99% residential before the pandemic, and now more than 40% of students are [enrolled in an online](#) or low residency program. Despite this shift, Lief said he does not see a departure from the residential experience in Boulder.

“I think we’re still very tied to a mission of mindfulness and compassion and service and social action,” Lief said. “That really hasn’t changed. How it manifests has been unique to the times.”

The graduate psychology program is the biggest and most popular degree path at Naropa.

“There’s been a significant impact certainly on the Front Range in mental healthcare,” Lief said. “So many of our alums have stayed here. There’s just no doubt that we are vastly disproportionately represented in the mental healthcare community than our size would suggest.”

Mental health is heavily studied at Naropa, along with the creative arts including music, writing and theater.

“That’s the reason, I think, that the psychedelic therapy has really kind of clicked here,” Lief said. “We were well suited to take a look at sort of the next frontier of mental healthcare. It was exciting for us to have an opportunity to be involved from the very beginning.”

Moving forward, Lief said he’d like to see growth in Naropa’s environmental justice programs. Smith said Naropa needs to become more accessible through online learning while still striving to bring more diversity physically to Boulder. She’d like to see Naropa become more affordable and racially and ethnically diverse while continuing to train ethically-oriented leaders.

“I would imagine that it’s really hard to find anyone who doesn’t agree that that’s what the world needs right now,” Smith said. “People who can have profound empathy for one another.”

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