

Building a Tradition: the CU Boulder Legacy Walk

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“Who knows only his own generation remains always a child.”

George Norlin selected these words to grace the entrance to the library that would eventually bear his name. As we contemplate the future of the University of Colorado Boulder through the Academic Futures initiative, it is important to reflect on our rich heritage and the value it can provide in linking to our present and future students.

History and tradition help to provide a university with its identity. Traditions create bonds that are passed from generation to generation. These bonds establish a continuum through which students understand why they are undertaking their education. This in turn sets expectations and creates the narrative around which students, parents, and grandparents share stories that unite them and tie them to a common experience. History and tradition are the foundation on which great universities envision their future as the next step in a continuous journey to enriching the lives of students while transforming communities, nations and indeed, the world.

In the same manner as other leading international universities, the University of Colorado Boulder has a rich and notable history. Individual achievements abound throughout its history. Historians, philosophers, physicists, writers, actors, astronauts, athletes, students and alumni have each left their mark on the university. Notable events, discoveries, and contributions mark the passing of time through each decade. And throughout the timeline that defines the university, the constant has been the students that walk across Norlin Quad as they receive the knowledge and forge the learning experiences they will carry forth into the world, making their own mark and extending the university’s legacy in the process. In short, the University of Colorado Boulder has been and continues to be the nurturer of students, while being the home of great academics and the location of significant events.

However, in the quest for defining the future, we often discard this past and its potential for serving as a foundation and anchor for our future as well as the basis for traditions that create an identity for the University of Colorado Boulder community. In recognition of the need for this foundation and collective identity, the recommendation is put forward to reimagine the concept of legacy and utilize the entire campus as a living and growing legacy. Through the establishment of a new vision of what an educational experience can be, a Legacy Walk can be developed throughout the campus that is both a living history and a rebirth of the rich traditions that are the heart of the University of Colorado Boulder.

The Legacy Walk

An almost magical thing happens at CU Boulder when the beauty of the campus and the surrounding environment combines with the spirit of innovation that defines the university's past and present. The Legacy Walk – a physical experience of the campus's past and present, builds upon this phenomenon. The Legacy Walk is a physical expression of a historic timeline that would commence at the historic foundation of the university, Norlin Quad, and then extend throughout the campus to recognize notable figures and events throughout the campus history and from all disciplines. However, a first step in implementing the Legacy Walk could focus on Norlin Quad and then extend throughout the campus in subsequent stages.

The Legacy Walk would combine notable events, people, and contributions to highlight the growth, impact, and legacy of the university. It would ask student participants to consider the roles and contributions played and made by their predecessors, while also confronting controversial issues and notable events of the past that were occurring outside the university that nonetheless directly influenced life at CU Boulder.

The concept for such a walk is not unique. Many universities have similar concepts including the University of Minnesota, the University of Tennessee, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and many others. In each case, the walks serve as a place of honor, identity, and tradition for the university. The difference for the University of Colorado is that the Walk would also serve as the foundation for our academic future – a place of beginning as well as a place of history.

The format of the Walk could be open for competition. However, the final implementation should reflect the innovative spirit of the university by combining traditional brick and markers approaches with the latest technology to include an augmented reality-based experience. The Legacy walk would combine the immediate physical experience of the walk with opportunities to explore further through the libraries and museums on campus. The physical experience would open the door to invite the individual to follow an individual path at our university.

The Legacy Walk creates an opportunity for the university to rethink traditional approaches to legacy and bring our own combination of talents to our specific implementation. The specific format is less important than the anchoring of the university in a place of honor and tradition for students, visitors, alumni, faculty, and staff. The legacy of the university is one that can unite former, current, and future community members. Whether it is in education, research, or outreach, the past can serve to anchor the next generation and continue to build the CU Boulder legacy.

Tradition

The identity of CU Boulder has been an issue since the day it was opened. Is it a university for Colorado or for out-of-state students? Is it an elite institution or a place for every student? Is it diverse and inclusive, or majority dominated and exclusive? How will it serve the needs of individual students but also be a resource to all of Colorado? These are questions that have been asked since the first decade of the university. The Legacy Walk can take a first step in offering answers to these questions (and perhaps posing other questions for future generations of CU

students to answer) by helping to create an identity based upon our shared experiences, legacies of achievement, and history (for good and ill).

The Legacy Walk can also be the basis for introducing new traditions at the university. Building on the image that President Baker introduced in 1893 of the lantern being lit with the charge to students to, “Let Your Light Shine,” the Legacy Walk could be the focus of a tradition where “Walking the Quad” could be the first tradition that students are exposed to as they enter the university. A ceremony could be held where upper classmen ring the Quad and hand off lanterns or lights of some kind to new freshmen as they traverse the walk and learn the university identity. The Legacy Walk could then be a place of honor and respect where ceremonies are held throughout their CU experience.

CU could also establish a “Heritage Day” where we have events around the campus highlighting a point in time or an event. Possibilities such as this are extensive. However, the underlying foundation remains consistent that we are tied together by the heritage and the focus on keeping the lamp lit for each class.

Finding the Identity

Names, dates and events alone do not create an identity. Rather, it is the shared experience of discovering the things we have in common. From this perspective, the creation of the Walk would bring together alumni, students, faculty, staff, and even community members to nominate and select the events and people that are honored on the walk. Some of the selections will be obvious such as Sewall, Norlin, and Stearns, if for no other reason than their serving as namesakes for major buildings on campus, but others such as Mary Rippon, Mildred and Charles Nilon (the university’s first African American librarian and faculty member, respectively) and other faculty of color will reveal a rich history of strong contributions to CU by women and people of color – often against a backdrop of discrimination and oppression. Others still will be unknown to current students such as the radio research done in Hale Science or our Pulitzer Prize winners or notable alumni. The result is almost less important than the process of bringing us together to select the people and events that define us and define the campus.

After spending considerable time reading and researching our history, the University of Colorado Boulder does have a shared identity. However, there are many perspectives on this identity. The fascinating, challenging, and enlightening part of the identity process will be bringing these diverse perspectives together to create a shared identity that will serve as the foundation for the future.

Impact

Identity, heritage, and tradition are the foundation of any great institution. Generations are connected through identity. Location, time, and age becomes secondary to shared experience and identity. Identity enhances admissions, donations, recruiting, retention, and interdisciplinary connection.

These items are tangible. The results are measurable. However, the impact of identity and legacy are most importantly felt at the emotional level. The Legacy Walk is designed to build an

emotional bond between the students and the university. Rather than merely focusing on how to successfully navigate the university, the Legacy Walk challenges all who enter the university to establish a lifelong bond that is as strong as the stone that faces our buildings.

A future and reimagined CU Boulder will be enhanced by a shared identity and understanding of where we come from, what we've been through, and what we have contributed. The Legacy Walk can provide that connection and serve as the beginning of the academic traditions that so many of us have long wished to exist.