

## NAROPA UNIVERSITY

# To learn in the moment

BY CAROLINE HSU

**T**he basement of the stately brick Lincoln Building at Naropa University hides an institutional rabbit warren of small offices and narrow hallways. Here, away from the Tibetan Tanka paintings, Balinese protection masks, and Sanskrit calligraphy that grace the upper floors, the staff of the tiny campus copy and mail center is posting packages and collating class materials. On the wall, they've taped up a simple sign: "If you must wait in line, Take the time to *practice*."

Ok, but practice what? For the students and faculty at Naropa, in Boulder, Colo., this is a central question. In one sense, it refers specifically to the practice of meditation. But the resonances are broader: "For me, it means to practice patience, compassion, and awareness," says Sarah Keiser, 19, who plans to major in psychology and the healing arts. "It's just a chance for people to recheck themselves."

Which Naropa students often do. A town hall meeting posing the question "Is Naropa walking its talk and are you?" draws a full house of vocal students with a spillover crowd straining to hear from the halls. "We have an immense, immense responsibility," Sydney Gressel, 22, tells the students perched all around on mismatched couches and floor cushions. "What are we doing as the 1 percent of the world that can afford higher education? If this school doesn't produce people who are benefiting the world, then we're f---ed."

Still young. Founded 30 years ago by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a prominent exiled Tibetan monk responsible for much of the rising profile of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, Naropa began as a summer institute, then became a graduate program, and enrolled its first official four-year undergraduate class in 1999. Although three decades—and at least one cultural era—have passed since its inception, in some ways, the school still exists in 1974, a time when anything, even starting a Buddhist college from scratch, seemed possible. At the same time, its emphasis on eastern philosophy, meditation, and body awareness is very 2004.

The core of the curriculum is "contemplative education," which blends academic theory with artistic practice. Underlying that is the cultivation of self-awareness through meditation and movement courses such as tai chi, yoga, aikido, and Japanese tea ceremony. Lectures often begin with meditation, and all classes are conducted with students and the professor

sitting in a circle. "The idea is that everyone has something to teach and learn," says student Jessie May Kezele, 21. Thomas Coburn, Naropa's president, says that rather than being a New Age innovation, the curriculum is actually a return to the classic liberal arts idea of educating the whole person. "Only after the Enlightenment did we get the idea that truth is out there," says Coburn, and then, pointing to his chest, "not in here."

At the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, Naropa's version of an English department (which was founded by poets Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman), students split their time between theory and practice. Each semester they take both a conventional literature class and a creative writing workshop. In addition, many enroll in the popular letterpress elective, where they set type, print, and hand-bind



NAROPA STUDENTS **TAKING A BREAK**. THE VARIED ARCHITECTURE INCLUDES SMALL CLASSROOM BUILDINGS WITH THE ROCKIES AS THEIR BACKDROP.

their own works. "When you have to pick each letter, put it in place, roll ink, and make sure you apply the correct pressure onto the paper, it teaches you a tremendous respect for the word and, as a writing lesson, it teaches you economy," says Steven Taylor, chair of the writing and poetics department.

For Dorothy Abdullah, 26, a third-year student studying traditional eastern arts, Naropa offers something she says her previous school, Oberlin, didn't: "To go along with our intellectual stimulation, we get heart stimulation." Abdullah is a convert from Islam to Buddhism. Many students here say they identify with Buddhist principles, though most hesitate to label themselves Buddhist. The school is careful to maintain that it is a secular university: Buddhist-inspired but open to all students. Courses are offered in contemplative Christian-

ity, Judaism, and Islam. "I am not interested in conversion," says Judith Simmer-Brown, a Buddhist and professor of religious studies. All students have the option of signing up for private instruction in "mindfulness of breathing practice," a nondenominational silent meditation. During the eighth week of each semester the campus comes to a halt for "practice day": Offices are closed, classes canceled, and all devote themselves to being, as Kezele says, "more present and aware."

But the rest of the time, Naropa looks somewhat like any small college campus, if quirkier: The school's architecture includes a small clapboard cottage that serves as the writing center and a Japanese teahouse on stilts that once belonged to Trungpa Rinpoche. Behind the century-old red-brick Lincoln Building lies a lush green where students do tai chi in the morning and eat lunch or have class on nice days. Of which there are many: Boulder gets 300 days of sunshine a year, plenty of time to take part in some of the best skiing, snowboarding, hiking, and rock climbing in America nearby.

Alternative lifestyle.

With his square jaw, short brown hair, and plain jeans, 26-year-old Robert Cooper looks as if he'd be more at home in an ROTC training program than at a Buddhist-inspired college. Indeed, after high school, he did a stint in the Marines and then settled in at his family's business in Topeka, Kan. "My previous worldview was one of anger and war," says Cooper. But a "Kundalini awakening" drew him to Buddhism, at which point he discovered Naropa on an online Buddhist discussion board. Now he's studying to become a therapist so he can help others, especially those who have experienced altered states of consciousness.

"The students that are attracted to Naropa tend to be students who are marching to the beat of a different drummer," says Susan Boyle, assistant vice president of admissions. While the school is not selective in the conventional sense—last year, 95 percent of freshman applicants were accepted and 82 percent of transfer students—the admissions process is perhaps more about self-selection. About one third of the entering first-year class come straight out of high school, but many students are a few years older and landed at Naropa after a few semesters elsewhere. Applicants are judged on academics and community service, as well as maturity and spiritual development—hardly quantifiable factors, which is why a 30-minute interview is required. "Part of the interview is to make sure not only that the student is ready for Naropa but that Naropa will fulfill their expectations and also to perhaps bring them down to earth a bit," says Boyle.

In the past, students have complained

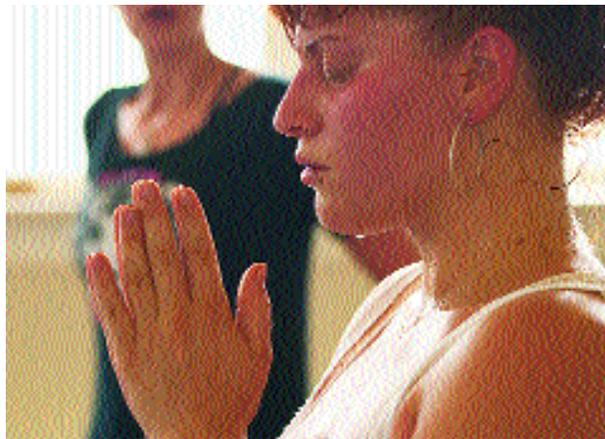
that the Naropa education emphasizes feelings and experience over academic rigor. Under Coburn, Naropa's first outsider president (past leadership has been largely drawn from the inner circle of founders who knew Trungpa Rinpoche), Naropa is moving toward more-demanding academics. Transfer students say they've worked harder at Naropa than at their previous colleges. And discussions are certainly different here. In a recent Philosophies of Embodiment class, students were asked to come up with methods of keeping time without clocks. Jeremiah Bowen, 25, referred to Australian aborigines, who used songs to mark time and distances. Jenna Chikasuye, 21, a transfer from the University of California–Los Angeles, talked about fertility cycles, adding that men also have them. "I learned from a Lakota native that a man can monitor his fertility through sensitivity in his chest and also by tasting his [bodily fluids]," she says. Prof. Nona Olivia's response: "I think I'm hallucinating this conversation."

Apart from questions about the educational rigor and a lack of some facilities, students also bemoan the school's fragmented physical layout. The main campus is about 2 miles away from the Paramita campus and a 10-minute bus ride from the Nalanda campus. Being located in the heart of Boulder has been both a blessing and a curse—the vibrant college

town in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains attracts students and faculty, but space is scarce and the cost of living is high. Sangha House, Naropa's only residence hall, is not on the main campus and houses just 26 students, most of them non-transfer first-years. The rest find their own accommodations in and around Boulder. And despite the open smiles and small classes, some say it can be hard to make close friends here. "In a way, it's a commuter college," says Joshua Siegel, 33, who at another school would be called the student body president but at Naropa is the "student voice coordinator." "There's not a lot of community space." This can be especially hard on students of color. At least three quarters of the student body is white, much like surrounding Boulder.

It's a fair assumption that most students who choose to attend Naropa aren't looking to land jobs at Goldman Sachs. Still, students here are all too aware that in some ways, they exist in a privileged bubble. "You go out into the world, and what have you got?" asks Owen Bonduant, 26, at a town hall meeting. "I've heard it called 'No-hope-a.'"

"I think that's bulls---," retorts Jenna Chikasuye. "It's completely dependent on what you want to do. If you want to be a writer, teacher, therapist, or social activist, Naropa is definitely the place to be. "It's the place where young warriors are in training." |



A STRENUOUS YOGA CLASS COMES TO AN END; BODY AND MIND ARE HARMONIZED IN A MEDITATION ROOM.

## NAROPA UNIVERSITY

Location: Boulder, Colo.  
 Undergrad enrollment: 455  
 60% female, 40% male  
 Tuition, 2004–05: \$17,630  
 Room and board: \$7,236  
 Combined SAT, 25th–75th percentile: 910–1170  
 Acceptance rate: 95%

