

Guest opinion: Charles G. Lief: Naropa is using its resources to realize a bright future

By DAILY CAMERA GUEST OPINION | openforum@dailycamera.com | Boulder Daily Camera
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By Charles G. Lief

Naropa University is celebrating 50 years as an educational and cultural gem in Boulder, and is looking toward its next 50 years. As the Aug. 16 Daily Camera article addressed, Naropa shares the financial challenges of many small liberal arts colleges. We differ as well. Many schools have closed from declines in enrollment, while we are growing. And some have lacked our strengths — including creatively increasing revenues and trimming costs.

This response offers important clarifications and corrections to the Aug. 16 article.

Naropa's decision to sell Arapahoe Campus was not "forced" to meet short-term financial challenges. That conclusion is egregiously incorrect. As we previously stated to the reporter, this sale will generate sizable capital to invest in Naropa's future — not cover deficits. Funds will not flow to Naropa for several years, so aren't of short-term financial benefit.

Unfortunately, higher education is filled with stories of schools that closed while owning valuable real estate assets that could have been used beneficially. For example, Goddard College, with millions in real estate assets, perhaps could have deployed those to meet its financial needs. Naropa leadership cannot presume to substitute our judgment for the leaders of other schools. However, we are committed to using our resources to realize a bright future.

The Naropa "magic" manifests at our physical campuses — but is generated by the people, not the place. For our first decade that magic, centered in the faculty and always in service of students, happened in our first homes — the old RTD bus garage, the second floor of what is now the Boulder Bookstore, and the gym at Casey Middle School. We currently, and deliberately, have no solidified plans for how we will invest the sales proceeds. We specifically negotiated to have the right to remain on the Arapahoe Campus for several years so we can involve our community in the planning process. And we continue to own the Nalanda Campus.

It became possible for Naropa to sell some underused property as nearly 50% of our students are enrolled in online or hybrid programs, and many faculty and staff work remotely. Naropa remains committed to both in-person programs and our growing community of online students. Naropa's largest program is the Graduate School of Counseling. The average age of incoming students is 35, students with deep roots in their communities who cannot afford to or choose not to move to Boulder.

Additionally, the June 2023 audited financial statements included the language required of auditors when an audited entity is financially challenged. The best answer to doubts of whether Naropa could “continue as a going concern” until June 30, 2024, is that we passed that date as a vibrant school with increased enrollment, reduced operating expenses and expansion into new areas.

The article shared incorrect information about student housing. The aging Snow Lion residence has become less attractive to students, and occupancy rates have declined. It sold in 2021 and is leased back until 2027. Naropa contracted with a private developer to build another housing facility, which we don’t own but is leased until 2035.

The Alaya Preschool was an internship site for our Early Childhood Education degree, which has not been offered for years. Naropa is collaborating with the Future of Alaya group, and they have until June 2025 to purchase the property. We know this generous, dedicated group of Alaya supporters will succeed.

The tuition references in the article are seriously flawed. Yes, our full-time undergraduate tuition is \$18,060 per semester; but crucially, we return more than 52% of that in need-based and merit scholarships. Our average net undergraduate tuition is \$15,700 and net graduate tuition is \$17,800 for the full year, not per semester — a very different analysis.

Naropa University was born in Boulder and will remain an important presence here. We are proud of our ability to serve students in new ways — including online — but we are not replacing residential learning with a solely online learning pathway. I invite you to look at the Sunday Daily Camera for four weeks, beginning Sept. 1, for a full-page montage of the exceptional Naropa community members who are our heart, and for the many ways our work benefits the world.

Charles G. Lief is the president of Naropa University.