



Building community through Symbol, Ritual & Tradition

Symbols, rituals, and traditions create a university's brand. They distinguish one university from another. But rituals and traditions do much more when they are participatory experiences, or reminders of those experiences.

- They create strong memories which bind alumni to the time and place of their youth at university.
- They create common memories among graduates who attended university together, but did not know each other there, or did not have other common interests.
- They create a similar experience and a sense of shared memories for multiple generations of students and people from different eras.
- They can also reflect cultural values that reflect the institution's values and bind generations together.
- They can sometimes offer alumni not just memories, but a way to continue to participate in traditions, along with other alumni and students, and re-experience their transformative effects.

For look at how social interactions and rituals bind groups together see the work of Randall Collins. (For a quick look at what his work suggests for alumni relations, see <http://alumnivolunteer.org/binding-communities/>.)

Encourage and support a multiplicity of student groups, organizations, teams, and activities. Student activities have value in themselves for the actual and interpersonal skills they impart. They also develop their own symbols, rituals, and traditions. These may be embraced by the entire university community. The student group (its existence and excellence) can itself become a symbol. Alumni are often willing to provide monetary support to continue it.

- MIT has a tradition of highly-engineered student pranks (such as putting a police car on the roof of a building). Very few students are actually involved in pranking, but the whole community takes pride in their ingenuity.
- Yale has a tradition of a cappella singing groups. Most alumni were not members of a singing group, but such singing groups often perform at reunions, reminding all alumni of that part of the undergraduate culture.
- Penn State has a tradition of excellence in football. Other universities take pride in excelling in major sports.
- MIT has a tradition of excellence in pistol shooting – and ballroom dancing. Minor sports performed with distinction instill communal pride and counter stereotypes (e.g. these sports counter a stereotype that engineers are all awkward and uncoordinated). The MIT pistol team often triumphs over the U.S. military academies.

Sometimes traditions and rituals need to be monitored or managed by the university or sponsoring organization so that they develop into nurturing traditions rather than personally destructive ones. Keep things safe.

Institutionalize rites of passage, but make them accessible and revisit-able. Both official and unofficial times of celebration can be turned into memory palaces.

Make pageantry understood by the audience. A convocation for entering students or a graduation exercise are often produced with theatrical pomp and circumstance. However the symbol and gesture from long ago may not be understood by today's students or their parents. Make each song and ceremony relevant. Think about [the Parents Parting Ceremony at Morehouse](#).

Memorialize the seasons of youth. Student entertainment, especially when seasonal (such as a winter carnival or spring celebration) or geared to a specific time at university (such as a senior prom) can become concrete memories of time and place. These can be recalled when the seasons turn each year. University team sports can do the same.

Create and preserve spaces to remember. On some campuses, students rub the toe of an iconic statue for good luck. On others, couples may propose marriage under a particular bell tower. In others there are places not just to study, but to grab a cup of coffee, or to sip a glass of wine, or just hang out. If there are not places at university to remember having a special time, no one will remember much of the university. See also The Architecture of Return: http://looksetveritas.com/yalegale/resources/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Architecture_of_Return.pdf.

Recognize and nurture those traditions that promote university values. Service projects can promote town-gown relations or unite far flung alumni. For example, at Yale, many community service projects are run under the umbrella organization Dwight Hall: <http://dwithghall.org/>. At Penn State, THON is the largest student-run philanthropy in the world, which runs a year-long fundraising effort that culminates in a dance marathon attended by thousands, and viewed on the internet by 150,000: www.thon.org. Funds go to fight pediatric cancer.

Extend traditions so that alumni can participate – and not just as spectators or donors. See, http://looksetveritas.com/yalegale/resources/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Organizing_by_Passions.pdf.

For more on traditions, see <http://www.collegexpress.com/lists/list/interesting-college-traditions/765/>, <http://campusgrotto.com/the-100-greatest-college-traditions.html>, or <http://fanindex.usatoday.com/2014/11/17/the-10-best-traditions-in-college-football/>.