

## NEWSROOM

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COMMUNITY ONE STEP AT A TIMEBOOK CHAPTER IN THE PRESIDENT TO PRESIDENT THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES  
AUTHORED BY PRESIDENT KELLY

December 18, 2025

Read time: about 6 min

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The first morning, I figured I would show up, maybe four or five other people would be there, and we would go for a nice stroll around the campus. I was new to the job, freshly appointed to be the sixth president of Christopher Newport University, a regional public university in southeastern Virginia. I didn't know many of the faculty or staff, or any of the students, for that matter. But I had been around colleges long enough to be confident that only the hardy and the curious would want to go on a 6:30 a.m. Wednesday walk with the new guy.

So on that first Wednesday morning of classes in August 2023, I was surprised to lead a group of about 30 of us, including professors and students, and even a few staff members. We set out on a 30-minute walk at a relaxed pace, beginning and concluding at the center of our very walkable campus. At the end, I took a selfie with the group because I wanted to have a keepsake of the moment and because I was still astonished by the turnout. What started with minimal expectations for a one-time walk has developed into a meaningful campus tradition. It has taken on new forms, achieved goals unrelated to exercise, and made community-building connections that I never anticipated. It costs nothing other than a few minutes of time and the rewards—physical, intellectual, and emotional—are, as they say, priceless. Like most good ideas in higher education, the inspiration for the Wednesday Walk was borrowed from another institution. Former University of Virginia President Jim Ryan, a colleague I hold in



high esteem, led his community on regular runs. My knees are a few years older than his, my campus is a tad bit smaller than UVA, and I thought a walk might be more inclusive, so we walk rather than run.

We hold the Wednesday Walk rain or shine from the beginning to the end of the academic year. If it's cold or drizzly, we head indoors to the track in our athletic center. If I have an out-of-town appointment, Provost Quentin Kidd takes the lead. We follow the same path every week, and I try to engage in conversation with all who are interested, although, for some at that hour, the walk comes easier than the talk. Our athletic teams join us, as well as groups from various campus organizations. There are no matching t-shirts, refreshments, or hovering staff members. As students increasingly struggle with finding community and feeling a sense of belonging, offering them no-stress options like our walks benefits their physical and mental health. Participants walk dogs and push baby strollers. One regular walker is a beloved member of our faculty who leads hikes and teaches classes along the Appalachian Trail. We also have Wednesday regulars who don't have the time or interest in joining groups. This is a chance to be part of something, to have friendly human contact with no expectations and no sign-up sheets. As students increasingly struggle with finding community and feeling a sense of belonging, offering them no-stress options like our walks benefits their physical and mental health. It is also a significant step toward our goal of being the most inclusive university in Virginia. Every walk, I learn something new and beneficial. As parents of teenagers will tell you, there's something about driving (or walking) face forward that opens up conversations. I find out about challenges facing members of our community and how I can help. I learn about accomplishments and developments in classrooms and offices that would otherwise be off my radar. I learn about the joys and sadnesses of family lives and can share some of my own. I take a selfie to post on [my Instagram account](#). And I make friends, whether we talk about the weather, student internships, or the latest and greatest on campus.

To attract new participants and highlight worthy campus activities, we hold a Wednesday Walk focused on environmental sustainability and another with a Denim Day theme as part of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. On the Wednesday before commencement exercises, we invite seniors to walk in their caps and gowns. We had more than 100 at the most recent Senior Walk, held in the midst of a week of celebrations and ceremonies. Whether the seniors were just getting up or expending their last burst of energy before bed, I knew not to ask. The walks have literally taken off in new directions. Our university, like many, had in the past held its surrounding neighborhoods at arm's length and, due to

decisions early in CNU's history, some of our neighbors understandably did not fully embrace the growing college next door. A small number of our upperclassmen rent houses in those neighborhoods, as do some employees. But, largely, we were a place surrounded by homes and families, churches and schools and yet, at the same time, removed from them. So we have used footsteps to build bridges, holding three very successful "Community Walks." We begin these mid-morning walks at the edge of campus and wind through nearby neighborhoods to the closest public school. It is a sight to see. The Newport News police chief joins us, as do many officers. Local firefighters walk, as do state legislators, the city's mayor, and city council members. Our mascot, Captain Chris, is often part of the throng. We usually have 150 members of the CNU community and the surrounding community participating. Sometimes local news media show up, but we don't seek them out. The neighborhood streets are framed with trees, and there is little traffic. All along the route, magic is happening. Conversations between new and old acquaintances are underway. If residents are outside their homes, we greet them. Our students, faculty, and staff feel like part of a larger community—the precise community we serve as a regional public university. And residents of that community see us as ordinary people who wish to be good neighbors. Our students, faculty, and staff feel like part of a larger community—the precise community we serve as a regional public university. The superintendent of schools and school board members greet us at the school entrance, our turnaround point. At each school, we have been serenaded by its band and cheerleaders. Captain Chris poses for pictures. The principal says a few words, as do I. We always present a gift, brought in a wagon that we pull along the walk. Sidewalk chalk and playground balls are a surefire hit. The schools create videos and stories they share with families across Virginia's fifth largest city. The schoolchildren see CNU as a place that is part of their lives, not unreachable and distant. The teachers and school administrators know we appreciate them. Our police force and the city's police force work together to protect the procession. Our public relations folks work with their counterparts at school headquarters and city hall. All of this good, hard to quantify but unquestionably worthwhile, happens in the space of about 45 minutes at the cost of a few boxes of chalk and the cookies we share at the end.

The Community Walks are also a physical manifestation of one of the four priorities of our new Strategic Compass, our plan for the next five years. This Compass priority is the result of the combined effort of more than 100 CNU students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends: "CNU will integrate with the community as an educational, cultural, societal, and economic hub of excellence." Each walk and each footfall is a step toward that integration. The walks are in addition to, rather than a substitute for, other engagement. After all, not everyone is keen on intentional

movement at dawn or a midday walk behind a mascot. I hold monthly office hours, eat often in one of our two dining halls, play intramural softball, and with my wife, Angie, attend countless performances, exhibitions, games, and events, ranging from pickleball tournaments to Pride Week. I have met face to face with families who live in residences on the streets at the edge of the university and engage with city and regional business and government leaders as often as possible.

All of that listening and learning has smoothed and informed the first two years of my presidency. Now, in my third year, I truly enjoy each opportunity to cheer, discover, and more deeply understand our diverse community, and I have no intention of slowing down. I think most college presidents would agree—this is the fun part of a uniquely demanding job. The risk for any deeply engaged college leader is that they expose themselves to unpleasant confrontations with those desiring to make a point. I don't believe you should avoid those conversations, and I would sure rather have them walking down a brick pathway on campus or sitting side by side at a basketball game. Then there is the time and energy it takes. Every hour you are walking and listening is an hour you aren't in a meeting or answering an email. That's an advantage, in my book. And I have never come back from a walk without feeling it was time well spent—for my health, the wellbeing of my companions, and the vibrancy of my university.

*Special thanks to all the Captains and to everyone in our community who I have had the privilege of walking alongside and to Jim Hanchett, CNU's Chief Communications Officer, for his contributions to this chapter.*

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