Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
BONUS Episode: The Future of Education: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities in Pandemic Learning

Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

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Introduction:
This is *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Hello, I'm Trevor Perry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association and I'm your host on *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*. Thanks for joining us for today's episode.

Hi, listeners and welcome to a special bonus episode of *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*. This is the first in a two-part special series of virtual public programs presented by NCA. Now NCA typically holds public programs twice each year and these public programs serve to disseminate relevant information about communication to public audiences. The programs are open to community members, members of the media, communication teachers and students, anyone really who's interested in learning more about communication. And past programs have focused on topics such as communicating about the role of race and social change in politics and communicating about the climate due to the COVID-19 pandemic. NCA's 2021 public programming will be held as a special series of the *Communication Matters* podcast as well as a series of videos. This series entitled “Communication & Resilience: COVID in Contexts” will include two public programs. And the first, today’s, in the series is entitled “The Future of Education: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities in Pandemic Learning”. Today we’re going to focus on how COVID-9 has brought changes to education and how those changes create challenges while at the same time offering opportunities for digital learning moving forward.

So be sure to check out NCA's YouTube channel for a video recording of today's conversation in this special public programming series. We're thrilled to have joining us today for the conversation about pandemic learning an all-star panel of pandemic learners and teachers: Vinita Agarwal is the associate professor at Salisbury University and chair of the NCA Teaching and Learning council. Mindy Fenske is an associate professor at the University of South Carolina. Alanna Gillis is an assistant professor at St. Lawrence University. Chris Gurrie is associate professor at the University of Tampa. Matthew Hubbs is dean of academics at West Cliff University. And Shannon Borke VanHorn is a professor at Valley City State University and the former chair of NCA's Teaching and Learning Council. You can view all of our panelists' detailed full bios at our website at natcom.org/PublicPrograms, all one word. Hi, everyone. Welcome so much and thank you so much for joining us today on *Communication Matters*.

The transition to online learning and a virtual learning experience last March was done really quickly and really suddenly. And I'm hoping that we can have a discussion to start us off today about how that adjustment period went for all of you at your institutions and how you feel you're doing it a year later in this new era of pandemic learning. And maybe Vinita will start us off and let us know how things are going at Salisbury.

Vinita Agarwal:
Thanks, Trevor, for that very relevant question. And you're right. When the pandemic really closed our campuses almost at a moment's notice, it was like within a weekend that we all found ourselves almost home and teaching from our personal spaces. I think one of the most important things for me speaking as an educator was to maintain a sense of continuity for myself but also for my students who were moving equally suddenly from their classroom spaces which were very physical to being little squares on a Zoom box and that too if they were fortunate because many of them were also struggling with disruptions in their technology and in their home spaces where access and family members were sometimes going to be competing for the same resources. So my goal was to maintain that sense of continuity in my life but also with my students' lives, minimize that sense of disruption in the learning experience. But also most importantly, I think I realized as the first week and the second week went by that students also looked forward to that connection online as a way of seeing the same faces again, feeling a sense of normalcy. So that was almost a space of being vulnerable for me myself but also for our students, having that emotion, being able to accept that we were all addressing things and learning was a way of processing that sense of change and also to maintain—I don't quite like the use of word control because it is so definitive and it presumes so much—but to sort of reclaim a sense of community and togetherness and a sense of we can guide or shape our direction moving forward in ways that provide us with the opportunities as you had said in this crisis. And now I think I would say that it's brought a sense of realization that isolation and distance, they're not just physical concepts

but they're also metaphorical in some ways. And so as much as we may be connecting on Zoom, we've all realized we can create community in different ways. To me, it offers an opportunity to look at that. Those constraints are also as visible as they are for many of our students but they're also ways for us to connect at a very human level with each other's identities as learners which was different in a face-to-face context but is very different online and, of course, to use a little bit of humor. Zoom memes for quarantines during the Zoom time was very interesting. It always helped my students and I get through. I'll wrap up this one by saying a sense of vulnerability and also keeping the fact that we could all, through a sense of community, find our way onward from here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
What about at USC, Mindy? How are we looking at the transition period maybe a year out into something different or the same in the forum?

Mindy Fenske:
Well, first of all, I just wanted to thank the Teaching and Learning Council. I think that there are lots of resources that were quickly put up on the NCA website for online transition and learning. And I don't know if everybody everybody's aware of them but they are there and they are useful and they continue to be so. And so I just wanted to thank y'all's work on that. Because one of the difficulties in the transition obviously was getting up to speed on a bunch of technology that I may or may not have had any previous experience with. So part of the question here is how did the institution respond, right? And they did their best, right? Because this was spring break for us, right? And so students just didn't come back from spring break which gave all of us shocked faculty members a week to figure out an online transmission delivery method. And let's be honest. There are a small amount of people who are really, really good at this and then a lot of people who just sort of knew some of it and then a whole bunch of us who are like, what is Zoom? I look back at my syllabus that I rewrote in that week and I talked about Zoom like it was like this alien technology. Like the language in my original syllabus that I reread, I was like, ah. If this Zoom thing works, right? My institution tried. I mean they tried putting webcams in all the rooms. They did that work. They did fine and I think that they made the right decision, right? I mean I think that there was no question that the right decision was made to turn to the online format. But difficult for an institution to put together a whole bunch of resources overnight in order to facilitate hundreds of faculty members to learn an entire platform of delivery and transmission that they had no experience with. And so I think they did as well as they could given the time constraints. I'm fortunate because, in fact, I have a colleague, Pat Gehrke who does this, right? This is his thing, right? He does online learning. And so I was able to turn to Pat a lot and he was just amazingly generous with all of the tools in his tool box. Transition, I've been teaching hybrid for quite a while now and I can operationalize hybrid when we get to questions about pedagogy and

whatnot. So I'll get there. We're moving, well, at least as of today, we're moving to face-to-face, pure face-to-face in the Fall of '21. And I think that there's a certain amount of trepidation behind that for a certain amount of our faculty members based on and I think the last time I checked in South Carolina, there was a 26% to 27% vaccination rate in our state. And so I think there's a little bit of trepidation and there's been conversations about requiring vaccination and whether or not we're going to be masking in the Fall and that kind of thing. And so in the transition, we had all of that sort of upheaval and uncertainty that happened when we went online and now another round of upheaval and uncertainty as we make a transition to more face-to-face kind of learning. So that's sort of how the institution is sort of dealing with it. It's been crazy. And then sort of personally at the same time, my computer crashed and our office building was flooded. So that also contributed to the insanity that was the transition. I've been out of my office since June of last summer. So there's an extra layer in terms of my personal experience that sort of makes everything a little bit more crazy making.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Bringing literal truth to the phrase when it rains, it pours.

Mindy Fenske:
Pretty much so. Yes. Yes, indeed. But yeah. So at the end of the day, I mean some places have done better than others. That's just the way things work. I think that the University of South Carolina is doing well. They could do better. But I think that I want to be generous and say that there's a whole bunch of people who had a whole bunch of work put on them that they didn't anticipate. And so not everybody's going to be perfect.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Did you see the same thing, Alanna? Were the institutional reactions similar, the same, different, more successful, less successful at St. Lawrence?

Alanna Gillis:
So I'm actually in a little bit of a different situation than everyone else here because last March, I was actually finishing graduate school. And so that transition was announced less than two weeks before I was supposed to defend my dissertation and I was also teaching a class. And so I was actually simultaneously experiencing a remote transition as both a student and an instructor and now I'm working at a liberal arts college. And so I've really been able to see how two different institutions are responding in the process of collecting data from students about how each institution's transition has gone and students' experiences with it. So I would say last Spring it really felt like this big emergency. If I had to use one word to categorize it, it was chaos where all of a sudden, we needed to be making new choices and new decisions and there were no best

practices because this isn't just remote teaching. This is emergency remote teaching. And so that distinction matters because my students sometimes went home to places that didn't have any internet access because they never were supposed to attend school there or my students, their parents lost jobs and now all of a sudden, they need to be working a full-time job so that they don't get evicted from their homes. And so this emergency crisis wasn't just with remote teaching. It was the entire world crumbling around all of us, both our students and the instructors. And so the Spring, I think that I was attending University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, finishing up my dissertation there. And I think it was chaos but I don't think that they necessarily could have done anything better to help prevent that chaos. And so I think for me going forward when thinking about how is the institution doing a year later, to me the dominant word now is uncertainty. So we're planning for one possibility but then having to have numerous contingencies about that at the institutional level. We can think about that in our approach as instructors. I'm really appreciative that that's how I've been encouraged to approach every semester by my chair, by my administration, is to think of this as we want you to have a plan in place but we want you to think about the fact that things might have to change. And so going into it knowing that I don't need to have a perfect plan in place because almost certainly something's going to change. At St. Lawrence, in order to de-densify campus, we had students being able to join remote which had never happened before, we had some online classes that St. Lawrence has never had before during a normal semester. We also created this third semester this summer so that we could have students attend Fall, Spring, or Summer instead of Summer being sort of extra classes. It was a normal semester where students could attend, for instance, Spring and Summer and get their normal financial aid packages. That was supposed to include things like study abroad, all in-person classes. And of course, that has been completely overhauled. And so my colleagues and I, our classes just ended for the Spring last week and now we're starting to think about what is Summer going to look like in comparison to what we had thought it would be. But I think at this point that this lasting uncertainty for a year has helped us all be a lot calmer and able to be a lot more flexible as we've learned the tools and structures that can help promote these sort of successful transitions and with institutions that when all of a sudden conditions changed had a contingency already in place. And so yes, there have been moments of chaos and stress when at one point in the Fall semester, I think a quarter of our campus got put in a preventative quarantine at some point and all of a sudden, classes were remote for that week. But we had these contingencies in place. And so I think that that's sort of the best we can hope for if we want to have any sort of in-person component which I was appreciative to be able to have that experience being a new faculty member to be able to choose to teach in person just so I could start to get to know my new campus. But a lot of my colleagues were allowed to choose to teach fully remote.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
That's a great segue to our next sort of concern. And Chris, you might be in a great position to think and relate to us more fully how pedagogical values and strategies and techniques that you've developed during the pandemic, are some of those just going to go away if we go back to in-person teaching or what are some of the strategies and techniques that you've managed to adopt during this crisis so to speak? And are any of those going to linger on when we go back to in-person teaching?

Chris Gurrie:
Well, I can't say I would miss not having to get fully dressed to drive to campus for one meeting for 40 minutes from Zoom. So we can keep that around. But I do think that there'll be some pedagogical things that stick around. But some that I think trail us and we're still seeing sort of the remnants of this past year to follow up to the previous question such that I direct the master of arts and professional communication program which was launched to be a fully face-to-face program. Now we have students asking to do things on Zoom that we never pedagogically plan to put online. And so I think we're stuck in a similar situation that maybe corporate America is where well, it worked a year ago and it worked now. So why can't I do this thing the way that I want to do this thing? I want to go to New York and have a job and just drop into your class when I want to. And so that's one thing I think is we're going to see sort of this wake of things that we did, as Mindy said, in an emergency and see them codified into sort of practice. But my hope for all of the people here and out there would be that it would be codified into best practices, what's best impact for our students. And so I think we'll see some things stay and then I think there's things I hope go away, right? I still have some colleagues that are lecturing on Zoom for two hours. You can't lecture on a computer screen for two hours when those poor students have two more classes to go in that afternoon. Nobody should sit at a computer for six hours without taking a break. And so I hope that we learn best practices around those things that we've all adopted. NCA has had really great resources for getting up, moving around, and offering some sort of high touch and low touch experiences through Zoom. So that's what I'd have to say about that is I think we'll be dealing with sort of the wake of what we did in an emergency situation and hopefully, we'll keep some of the best things like short meetings could be on Zoom and then we'll go back to some of the great team building things where there's a high touch experience for our students.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah, that's interesting. That transition is going to be a real challenging moment for a lot of us. Matthew, over at Westcliff, are there any particular pedagogical values, techniques, or strategies that you think are going to survive or, like Chris, maybe some of the worst ones will go away? What are some of the best practices that you're going to take away from the pandemic learning experience?

Matthew Hubbs:
Thank you, Trevor, for the question. The unique setup we have at Westcliff is we've actually been doing live online learning for over 10 years. Our online program is really a mirror of our on-site program. In fact, often we would combine classes together with some technology set up in classrooms. So the transition wasn't that challenging for us, at least not nearly as much as those who had no exposure to it. But we did find the need to provide faculty who would have preferred to been on site and weren't as comfortable teaching online and would do it if that's what the class required or the students required, that they did require some additional support, development, training using tools to keep students engaged in this digital platform. There's a lot of competition on that screen and students can look like they're engaged and absolutely not be. So I do agree that the two-hour lecture has no place in this environment. It really needs to be an engaging process. As far as what I think that we will see moving forward, I believe that this pandemic has really served as an accelerant for embracing online learning. I think more people, I think when the when the tide sort of ebbs back to somewhat normalcy, I don't think it ebbs back all the way. I think more people have been exposed to what they were maybe fearful of or felt unsure about and have found a confidence in being able to learn or teach in that environment. And I think that we'll see more prevalence there. I don't think by any means it's going to replace in-person instruction but I think more people have been exposed to learning in this capacity and quite frankly are more comfortable with it, have seen the value of the flexibility it provides, have found out they can be successful in it and will likely choose to stay with it once choice becomes theirs again.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
That's an interesting question, that balance I think between how we're going to negotiate this return to face-to-face and yet still recognizing that a lot of people are going to enjoy and want to continue the online learning experience. Shannon, do you think that's a balance that can be struck or are we in for some tumult over the next few years?

Shannon Borke VanHorn:
First off, I think that our first year students that are going to be coming to us now from schools that have been doing this now in high school, for them, it's not going to be as unusual as it is for all of us in teaching a course. They may think that this is what courses look like now because that's what they've been doing in high school the past year and a half. So I think that we're going to see students, our first years being a bit more adept, the traditional students. I think that this is going to be more of a challenge for us as seasoned faculty members because I mean admit it. We joined the academy partly because we like talking to people face-to-face and we really did that. And so I think this is going to be more of an adjustment for us. I do see synchronous courses continuing. I keep saying synchronous and we have really put our classes maybe in a box in different boxes or categories at BCSU especially this Fall. We have it listed in our catalog or in

our actual schedule whether a class is going to be asynchronous and we've been doing that for years. Our many majors that have been an asynchronous online. So we've been doing that and doing it well for years. We have labeled whether it's a face-to-face which we've also been doing pretty well. And then we have that synchronous thing and I really kind of call it that synchronous thing which we had one department that had been doing this for years and they're doing it great and the rest of us are still trying to find those best practices. Our instructional designers and our faculty development people are still struggling and trying to work that because they've been so focused on here's how you create this great online course which is asynchronous and now they're having to come forward with those kinds of issues too. I don't think that this is going away, asynchronous is going away. I think that our challenge is trying to find the best way to engage our students as they're sitting there as a box, trying to figure out those tensions and trying to figure out are the students, should they be showing their faces online or not? What if they aren't showing their faces? There's a lot of debate going on right now. What are the practices we're expecting of our students if they are in a synchronous class? What are the practices we're expecting of faculty? So as Chris had alluded to, that they aren't that talking head. What are the things, how are the challenges, how are we going to be working with our faculty to meet the needs of our students and especially when we have these first-year students coming in from the traditional? This is what they're going to expect from us.

Mindy Fenske:
Because this question of best practices in terms of values and strategies, it really forces or at least forced me to go back to my pedagogical values, right? Because as I engaged in different technologies, my values didn't shift, right? And so I think best practices emerge between the values that you have in terms of your pedagogy and the constraints of the technology and how you make the best creative use of those constraints in order to achieve your values. So for me, my values are, I focus on pedagogical values, on process to achieve outcomes. I focus on learning over grades and I focus on interactivity. So if those are my values, my pedagogical values, then how do I engage through the technology and through the transition in such a way that I can have best practices emerge to achieve those values through the technology, right? What I did find in terms of best practices as well is the things that move forward is that we can achieve more access in some ways. So I was thinking like the very pragmatic thing like office hours, right? So my students can't always get to my office during office hours. And so I'm going to let them Zoom in, right? They're like, I can't get to your office during that time but can I Zoom in for five minutes to your office, right? And so that's something that can increase access which is another one of my values, right? And so how do I make this technology increase access moving into the future? And I also completely, and this is back to the talking head thing, I completely revamped the ways in which lecture operates and I'm not going to give that up either. I mean I like talking to people and I found in the transition that I was doing it too much in my regular classroom, in person classroom

as well, right? And so that's another thing I'll move forward. Like all right, Mindy, you don't need to listen to yourself speak so much. Maybe we need to break it up. Maybe that three to five minute time period that my students actually, the analytics tell me that my students are actually watching my online content, maybe I need to bring that forward because that's better for them, right? It's not just about me. And I just wanted to know if anybody else had a best practice that they wanted to share. So we're talking about it sort of abstractly. And so is there like a specific thing that you can say, this is the thing that came out of this that I'm going to continue to do?

Alanna Gillis:
Sure. One thing that I've done that I would consider a best practice is that I had always been given the advice that it's good to have a check-in with my students to see how this semester is going and I historically always had that be one fairly lengthy like survey type response about a third of the way into the semester to get really formal responses back from them about how different components of the class were going. And I think one of the things that I have been doing with the pandemic that I am going to keep going forward is more frequent, smaller, less structured check-ins where I can get far more of a sense from students both how the class is going in sort of a broad picture but also if there's really small things I could tweak that can help them in the class. And so it can be an opportunity for a student to say, I can't see your handwriting. Can you write a little bit bigger? Or really small things that a student is generally not going to feel comfortable telling me unless I give them this opportunity. And so in my classes, I give daily reading quizzes to incentivize them to do the reading before they come to class. And so just tacking on one open-ended question of what's something that's either going well for you or not going well for you this semester that I could possibly switch. And students are telling me, a lot of them are this concrete thing that is really helping them which I'm like, all right, great, I can continue doing that or small things that I can change and I think that that's something that is the best practice in order to make sure that the things we think are working are working and in real time not using this class to improve future classes but things you can do right now in this semester as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Well, thinking about best practices too, how do we ensure equity? We know that in this–we were looking at a situation where our student populations were the most diverse ever and yet the pandemic has brought out that many of them are disproportionately impacted by the technology, by the pandemic, by the health disparities, you name it, right? How do we reckon with that? How do we balance all of that out?

Vinita Agarwal:
I think the question you raise and you connected health disparities to it is very important because I think one of the ways that the pandemic has really illustrated to us is access and other kinds of

resource issues are definitely more visible now where U.S. university infrastructures had, at least in the university, had this whole equity of everybody having the same internet access speed. When you're in your own personal spaces, you're struggling with maybe do I need to increase my bandwidth in some way. Do I have to change my plan or pay more for my plan in some other ways? The other aspect here with the health disparities part is that it's about the whole concern of wellness and safety and issues that relate to people's well-being to the forefront and it seems all right in terms of best practices to check in, as Alanna—I think I'm pronouncing your name correctly—with your students at the beginning of the class to say how's everybody doing, how's everybody's presence here, is everybody present to learn in the ways that we used to take for granted before in the classroom and being present in class to take attendance was assumed you were well. So I think that a little bit of health and wellness and well-being has become a more mainstream part of our discourse now in the classroom. The other aspect of equity is that we've also with the attendant aspects of all these social movements and the awareness of racial and the intersectionalities between racial, economic, and various sorts of gender, age, parenthood, all those aspects have become, they're there. Universities have dealt with them. We've had movements in our classrooms, in our schools where concurrently as we were moving offline we were also dealing with the Black Lives Matter movement and that happened at Salisbury. We were addressing all of that even as we were going offline. So I think one of the best practices that emerged both for the institution and for me as an instructor were that multiple modes of communication and two-way communication, listening in by both administrators, by instructors, and checking in with students not just with respect to technology. Somebody made that point. But also as we kind of look, at I think Mindy said, with Zoom, you can have your office hours there. But another thing that has happened is that when we look at our classrooms, we have that aspect of checking in with our students on the chat box. A lot more casual and it's got that personal touch to it. It opens up a space of communication. So best practices for me is integrating, of course, health and wellness and those conversations with the learning experience, multiple modes of communication, both institutionally as well as in the classroom with the instructor and the student, chat boxes, different ways of Zooming in with your office hours and also enhancing your instructor presence to be a little bit more human with respect to understanding whether students' environments and ours intersect at a very similar level with respect to struggles with disparities and those kinds of constraints, technological and also a lot of the other intersectionalities that we've been going through socially as a society.

Chris Gurrie:
One of the things that I would mention here as a communication scholar and to my colleagues as well as people out there is what's the purpose? Like what are we trying to do with some of the things that we're talking about? And the health disparity thing is the one that came up quite often for me the last six months. And I'd love to see if you guys shake your heads if this has happened

to you as well or if you're listening, if people agree, where when students said that they were ill whether it was COVID-19 or something else, there would be this sort of de facto I'll just Zoom in and that to me was, my first pushback to that was always well, are you healthy enough to like to do the Zoom? Because when I don't feel good, I don't want to be on Facebook, I don't want to be on the computer. I want to be in front of Law & Order on the couch with something to drink and that's it. Like I don't want to be Zooming or working my mind. And so I wonder too if we'll see some health disparities here where people are like oh, just Zoom in, just Zoom in but you really have a student for six weeks who was ill and not getting the same experience as a student who has their computer on, their webcam's ready to go, they've got their notes up and ready to go. And we don't really know those answers because we can't reach into their office or their dorm and see if they are laying on the couch watching Law & Order. So that's something, I don't know if y'all have experienced the same thing but people would say I'm just going to Zoom in thinking it was identical as much as we tried to create it to be identical.

Mindy Fenske:
I think that I can see where not coming to, focus on your health versus the class but this gives them an opportunity to stay up with the class without. So I think that there might be some with that. I think that we really need to be thinking about as institutions our students and what their capabilities are, especially our distance students. One of the things that I like to do is I send out a survey before classes even begin and one of the questions that I put on this wall was what do you have? What is your bandwidth like? What is your internet access like? Have you had—and I tell them, you don't have to tell me this. But is there anything that you want me to know about your situations? Because that will help me not only with my expectations but also help me in what the students produce and what they are willing to share and give to me. I think that we really do need to have some grace and compassion and recognize that our students are all going to be coming to us from different directions. We have a lot of first-year students, our first year generation students at our campus, a lot of first generation that this is their first experience of college anyway. They may be low income. They may not be able to afford some of the things that that we're expecting. They're losing their jobs because of the pandemic and they don't have the mentorship that they would have in a face-to-face type of situation. Some people have said that Zoom kind of flattens the system, that anyone can be on Zoom. I don't know if I agree with that or not. I do recognize that yes, anyone can come and talk to me at any time within limits, not at two in the morning which I've had a student try. But it does open that equation. But I think that we have the issue of some people don't even have the access to Zoom.

Alanna Gillis:
I wanted to sort of answer this question about equity in terms of I think a lot of the things we've been focusing on are sort of like the short term, what are the immediate things we can do right

now in our teaching which I think are critically important. But I think it's also important to be thinking about the ways in which this is not just a short-term problem but the way in which this will continue to impact our students' trajectories. And so if we think about what research shows about, so far we're talking about the students who are successfully in our classes but we can think about the students who have been forced to take breaks because their parents and they lost their access to childcare or students who have had such a bad mental health crisis that they've had to withdraw for the semester. And so I think that it's really important to think about what are we doing in our own classrooms to be inclusive but I think it's also really important to think about both what can we do as individuals to reach out to students. We know students who take breaks are going to be less likely to graduate. We know they're going to be, their GPAs might be lower, their financial aid might be at risk. And so what can we do as individual instructors or faculty members both to like reach out to students that we know and provide encouragement or support or help but also pressure our institutions to make sure that they're making the sort of changes to policies that are needed to help students continue to succeed? So a lot of the students who come from wealthier backgrounds are actually experiencing this time is a relative academic success. They have fewer things going on in their lives because a lot of extracurriculars have shut down. So they're actually seeing higher GPAs, more engagement, more time for their coursework. And so that gap we've always had between students who have more privileges and fewer is growing. And what are we doing to support the students who are facing even more troubles than they have historically? Are we changing things about the ways in which withdrawals show up on students transcripts and factor into their GPAs? Are we changing the ways in terms of potentially like major requirements or gen ed requirements in ways that can help students who have disproportionately borne the trauma of this pandemic and its economic and public health outcomes be able to continue to engage in our institutions? Or are we going to lose them? Are they going to be students who never end up graduating, who end up riddled with student loan debt, and instead of college being a pathway for mobility just ends up being someone who's stuck in an even worse economic position than they were before? And so I think it's both what can we do as individuals and what can we make sure our institutions are doing as well?

Mindy Fenske:
I don't think that we can move on from the discussion of equity without talking about race. That you mentioned that there's a highest population of folks, diversity that, like the increased diversification in the university and what the effects of the pandemics specifically in terms of diversity. And I have to say that one of the biggest challenges for my university is the question of DEI. Now I'll just give you a specific example which is to say that the population in the state of South Carolina that identifies as African-American is 27.9%. The population at the University of South Carolina Columbia campus that identifies as African-American is 10.2%. So we have a recruitment issue and we have an access issue, right? And what I'm hoping and I don't have any

data to support this but one thing that I'm hoping is that because of the inherent problems with testing systems as part of the admissions process, there's been a way to provide an additional disadvantage or disincentive for people of color and disadvantaged populations people to get access to the university or to apply to the university. One of the pandemic responses is to not require the ACT or the SAT for admissions for the year of 2021 at the University of South Carolina. And so in terms of equity, there's going to be a certain like the disadvantaged population that Alanna's talking about, they're going to go away. People who don't have money are going to just, and this is referring to Vinita's intersectionality question, I mean there's going to be a certain population that intersects in particular vectors that is going to, they're not going to have access to higher education. I mean there's going to be folks who lose it. But I'm hoping that there are also folks who gain some particularly because of this testing requirement not being for admissions. And I think the University of South Carolina is not alone in that, like waiving that requirement for admissions. So I think that it's talking about giving access to diverse populations is a struggle at my university and I think it's probably a struggle in higher education. It is a struggle in higher education right now. So I'm really interested in—I'm sorry to—

Trevor Parry-Giles:
No, no. It's fine.

Mindy Fenske:
But I think that, I'm wondering what your experiences are your universities, what kind of DEI initiatives in response to the pandemic are emerging, if any, in terms of just making certain that the most marginalized populations are being targeted are in a positive way for access?

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Well, and it's not just at the undergraduate level. A lot of graduate programs have eliminated the GRE as a requirement and in large measure for increased diversity points. I don't know that this question about race and diversity and inclusion is all that separate from the question about student expectations in a post-pandemic world. So Matthew, do you have any thoughts on how those expectations are changing and how institutional openings or institutional broadening of student populations and the profiles there along racial, socio-economic lines, etc. might have an impact on those expectations moving forward?

Matthew Hubbs:
Someone mentioned earlier and I think it's a really important point that just because class is on Zoom and you can you can get Zoom on a cell phone, you can get Zoom with a wireless connection doesn't necessarily mean that everyone has even those components to access it. But I do think that technology can be very much an equalizer if done right. In fact, as I'm sure many

of us were both for education purposes, for healthcare purposes, etc. happy to see a recent infrastructure plan that included access to affordable high-speed internet for everyone. And so that's where I think we can get closer to technology being the equalizer and we are dealing very much with a population of I'm sure used the term digital native for quite a while now and I think it's apt. But it's also a further integration of digital interaction, technological interaction not just being exposed to it at a younger age but it being in part raised on it or in some cases, unfortunately raised by it, that this is so much a part of the language, the communication, the understanding, the interaction of the world with the generation coming into learning right now that I think that their expectations will align very much with that, that they will expect the institution to be tech savvy and to have not just technology integrated but to have it smoothly integrated into their practices. I think that students probably have as much, whether they know it or not, power over the education sector right now as they ever have with their choices of whether or not you go to school and with an understanding maybe from a generation of parents that maybe they don't need to right now or maybe it's not the right time. And so as we as institutions get more competitive for lack of a better word for students, that's an area that we have to excel in to be competitive. We have to meet them where they are in ways that they are used to communicating in learning with and if we don't, I don't think we're going to do them service. I don't think we're going to meet their needs unless we can speak in that language and speak fluently in that language. And I think in that way it does become, to tie into the previous question, it does become more of an equalizer and technology often inherently does.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Well, and I know the various proposals coming out of the government in the new administration are also targeting increases in funding to HBCUs, to historically serving Hispanic institutions, Native American or Indian colleges and universities and that might hasten exactly what you're talking about, Matthew, which is because in many ways, and correct me if I'm wrong, but to some degree, the technological expectations does cut across racial ethnic barriers to some degree. And so regardless of the school you're going to, the young digital native, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, what have is going to have certain expectations and that's fascinating. It does ask or raise the next question which is how do you think this is going to have an impact on general students and their decision making about higher education? Do they go to school now? Do they delay? How do they make these decisions? And again, going back to the question of diversity and inclusion and race, is it the same calculation across the board with these new opportunities? Do diverse students or students from underrepresented minority groups, do they have the same calculations in their minds about when and where to go to school? What do you think?

Mindy Fenske:
Well, first off, I think that the way that we are envisioning education, our traditional thought of what education is with our four-year degree or our masters, I think some of that is going to be changing. We're seeing a lot of talk about and we're seeing a lot of information that you don't need that four-year degree to be able to be successful. And I think that even us as four-year degree campuses and higher campuses need to start thinking about the smaller programs to meet the needs of some of these students. Maybe it's certificates in areas. Maybe it's that they're taking one or two classes at a time and it may take them 10 years to graduate. And if we have a block of time where we say that they have to graduate within or that they have to take all this within a certain amount of time or they have to start over, maybe they have prior learning, information from jobs or things that they've learned in other jobs that we need to take forward and look at that. Could that count towards credits? I think that we have to be a bit more global in what our institution is going to be looking at going forward. Because these are some of the things that without, we also need to make sure that we still have the quality there, that we still have the expectations, of course. But I think that the traditional school or institution that we're in may not fit for as many students as it has in the past and we have to be nimble enough to change with that.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah, Alanna.

Alanna Gillis:
So I think that there's a few things that come to mind with me when thinking about this question. One of them is that I think a lot of, if we think about the discussions that are happening like among public officials and newspapers, we often see a lot of this focus really centered on highly selective universities. Like how will this impact Harvard? And those are the wrong questions to be asking because the vast majority of our students do not attend universities like that. So I think that for highly selective universities, we will see little if any change in terms of how students think about approaching higher education. But I think that what we might see changes with are students who are not trying to attend highly selective universities, students who are coming, might be the first in their family to go to college or who are coming from high schools where they got A's and B's, maybe some C's. How are those students going to be thinking about higher education going forward? The way in which we've seen higher education systematically defunded over the last few decades has really resulted in a shift in terms of who colleges are prioritizing trying to bring in. More and more colleges are trying to bring in students who come from wealthy families who can help make up that gap. So as the states and the federal government have spent less money on higher education, that gap has to come from somewhere in terms of how does the college stay financially afloat. And the answer is donations but only wealthy universities can really rely on donations or the answer is full tuition paying students. And so a lot of those students are being

recruited. We're seeing this huge move in higher education to cater increasingly to wealthy students' desires. So investing in nicer student centers, revamping their gyms, these things that make college in some ways, I've seen criticisms more like a country club or summer camp experience. But that's not who most of our students attending colleges, that's not what a lot of those students need and I think as a lot of these lower and middle income students have experienced college in this year and have started really understanding how much of their money is going towards things that they may or may not need or want as part of their higher education experience, we might see some of those students starting to make different choices. And so we might see some of those students not seeing it worth the premium to pay for more expensive, the flagship state school or private colleges. As someone who works at a private college, I can still absolutely say this. But some of those students might realize that that money is not worth it because those are not the things they need to succeed and instead we might see more of those types of students potentially seeking out other forms of higher education, the ones that are often overlooked in media discussions of this topic.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah, Vinita from the regional public realm.

Vinita Agarwal:
Yes. And I wanted to follow up on some of the very good points that Alanna made to extend them to what, Trevor, you talked about how would different groups of students respond to these challenges. And I think one of the aspects that sort of is also embedded in this discussion is that with the kinds of social justice concerns that our students have become so involved in recently on campuses and so vocal about, I feel like those might play into their enrollment and universities recruitment efforts as well. I feel like some of their universities will need to be more proactive about including these kinds of their stand and their approach to creating a more inclusive and equitable environment in maybe their mission statements, on the websites, and different ways of presenting their ethos and culture. Because students are looking for those things. In most of my classes, the students are primarily white and some of them who come from minority backgrounds are very interested in knowing how the school or how their institutions are dealing with certain issues, not just rhetorically but in action and what kinds of programs do they have in place, what offices do they have in place, how are they marketed but not just in terms of well, there's one black student in this photo just because. But how does it show up in their dorms? How does it show up in the classrooms? And those practices become questions of choice in choosing which institutions they would go to. I think the other aspect is that of greater flexibility that Shannon I think alluded to earlier about having online as well as hybrid classrooms for students who may want to juggle work as well as family lives and different forms of career options, certificate courses, moving onward. I think the most interesting point remains to be seen how institutions will grapple

with the loss of international students and global programs and study abroad. And there may be opportunity in that. I think Matthew alluded to that with technology being an equalizer. But there can also be severe constraints with how we manage these and especially different kinds of global regions where you may recruit students and you may have different forms of classrooms and degree structures to restructure the institutional environment and degree around that. I think that's going to be interesting to see how that plays out.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I'm on the one hand heartened by all of this but on the other hand, I'm a little dispirited because I'm curious. Do you all believe that we're looking—is Alanna right? Are we looking at a more stratified higher education system where the rich kids all go off to, more, more stratified than it is now, right? The rich kids all go off to Harvard and Yale. There might be some diversity and the schools are going to have to worry about how they deal with persistent social justice issues, etc. But is it all going to be stratified by wealth and those in the middle class and the poor end up at—and it's not a bad thing. It's not a bad thing. But their choices are limited let's say.

Chris Gurrie:
I know it makes me nervous. That's for sure. I sat with a master's student the other day and she wanted to apply to doctoral programs, notably an EDD program. And so we looked at three EDD programs across the country and two of those were distance, right? So we're using the word distance because that's pre-pandemic language, of course. And they were from really good private schools, one in Texas and the other in central Tennessee.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Okay.

Chris Gurrie:
Okay? And one of them national champions, right? And so we then went to the tuition and fees button and the cost of the EDD at the Tennessee school was $2,100 a credit hour. So it was about five, six grand of course for a doctor of education to be a hundred thousand dollars. Now who can afford that if you're then making half that your first year out of your program and if you're taking federal student loan money at federal student rates of 6% and 7%? Rich people is the answer. And then looked at the state institution up the road from me here in Tampa. They were like $250 a credit hour which is a steal. But then that program will probably only let the 10 people in that were 4.9 GPAs, they were the president of every communication association ever created, as you guys have seen, probably Alanna has, four published articles before they even get their first job. So we're creating a disparate I think group and technology is actually allowing some of these private schools to charge more for convenience, not less. So to your point, I think we'll still see

kids that want to go to the University of Florida for football and we'll still see kids that want to go to Indiana University for fraternity life or go to Hawaii for marine life and things like that and it'll be the same kids it always was. But we have to make sure that some of these schools don't price out and box out some of our middle to lower class populist students. And I worry about that. I don't know if my colleagues do but I get really nervous about it.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
And then use the technology to do it even more.

Chris Gurrie:
Right, right.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Right.

Chris Gurrie:
So we're convenient. You happen to have a family or you have a real job so to speak that's going to pay for this. So we don't mind charging so much money because it's almost like healthcare in America. We don't mind charging so much because Price Waterhouse is going to pay for it, not you. And so that sort of then creates this false inflation and then little guys come along and can't get access. And that's not good.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
No. Add to that what Alanna also mentioned which is the declining share of state support for public institutions and that's happening across the board although the federal government and the relief programs have sort of stepped in somewhat to stem the tide on that. But add that into it and suddenly the public options don't become quite as attractive either and that's a real bind. Any other thoughts on student expectations, student choice making, where higher education is going with regard to diversity, equity, inclusion, student choices, student expectations post-pandemic world? Yeah, Alanna.

Alanna Gillis:
One more thing really quick. One thing that I think I've been excited to see is students, I mean we've sort of mentioned this, but students really challenging their universities to not use the pandemic as an excuse to not take this moment of racial justice seriously. I think a lot of us rightly so, we focused a lot today on how incredibly stressful and challenging it was for a lot of us to totally redo our courses for those of us who have been teaching in person or even people who have been teaching online, ways to like adapt it to these new pandemic contexts. And I think one

of the things that I've been really excited to see in my experience here at St. Lawrence has been students saying, yeah, we know it's tough but that's not an excuse to not do more of this work. And so we still want to see you challenging white supremacy in your classrooms. We still want to see you decolonizing your syllabi. We want to see more action. And so, for instance, one of the things, the debates going on at my university right now is that a group of students of color have asked that faculty be required to engage in diversity training. And there's been a lot of pushback among the faculty I've been very disappointed to see. We were supposed to vote on it this semester and that vote has been postponed because honestly, it's not clear that it would pass. And so I think something that has been exciting to me is that students are continuing to push back and saying we deserve a higher education experience that is inclusive of the students of color on this campus and we refuse to bend to the status quo and we refuse to use allow you to use the pandemic as an opportunity to not improve the racial climate on campus. And so that's something that has been really inspiring to me even if yes, there are days where it's like I realize, oh wow, this lesson plan that I used before isn't what I wanted to be or look at my intro syllabus and realize we didn't spend a single day talking about indigenous people and realizing I need to change that for this semester. And yes, that caused stress but that stress that I'm really glad that they put on me and my teaching has gotten better because of the intersection of this as a time where the pandemic is causing us to rethink teaching can also be a time to really infuse more racial justice in the way that we're thinking about it, particularly if we listen to the student activists who are telling us what they need.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
It's interesting too, as you're talking about that, it kind of harkens back to Matthew's point about the digital native. I also think and it cuts across the board, right? It's not just the students of color. It's the white students as well. They are diversity natives, right? I mean they are, many, not all obviously, but the students and their expectations, they are all clamoring for this greater diversity. And I think that's a really important point. That might lead nicely to our sort of wrap-up question which is a round robin, right? What's the primary lesson that anybody has learned or that you've all learned from this past year? If you had to say one thing and one thing that's going to last, what's that primary lesson from the pandemic? And we can go in reverse order. So Shannon, what's your primary lesson from the pandemic for teaching, learning, and teaching and learning?

Shannon Borke VanHorn:
Embrace change. Change is inevitable. Embrace it. What are the ways that you can make things work? Mindy had brought up something quite well earlier about how can she make herself work with the technology, don't let the technology lead you. How can you make change work? And that's probably, I mean we know that change happens. We know that it's continuous. But the pandemic isn't going to go away even with vaccinations. We have new things that are going on

and we just need to be flexible and embrace change. The other thing—I have two. The other one is grace. I've learned to extend more grace than I have in the past. I wouldn't say I was a hard ass but I was known to be a bit more at high, really strong expectations and all those expectations have not gone away. I've also had to learn to be more open, more compassionate, and extend grace.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
That's great. So embrace change and practice grace. I like that. Matthew, what do you think? What's the primary lesson that we can take away?

Matthew Hubbs:
I've learned more so to trust in the resiliency and the tenacity of our student body and our faculty, to listen to them, and respond with an open mind. That has been I think one of our keys to what I would call success although it's nothing to celebrate necessarily and the hardships that we've gone through. But to have as much of our finger on the pulse of what our student body is saying so we can adjust and be flexible to them. And just trust that they're going to adapt. They're going to get there as long as they have the tools and as long as we are responsive to them. And that's our obligation, to listen and to respond. So as long as we do that, they'll bring the grit in order to be successful. We do have to listen. We do have to provide the tools.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I know I speak for academics and faculty everywhere when I say we love to hear that from a dean. That's a great primary lesson. Chris, what do you think? What's your big takeaway from the pandemic year of teaching and learning?

Chris Gurrie:
I think from my perspective, Moravian talked about immediacy which all of us have probably heard in our speech studies in some way, right? Our immediacy is our connection to people. And I think now more than ever, the creation of immediacy, being able to feel close to our colleagues and our students is important. And so we see it even though we are adjusting, like Shannon said, to Zoom and all this stuff. I don't know about you guys but when I go over to campus for something, I get like a bump because I've seen somebody I haven't physically seen and been able to like elbow bump or whatever. So that was the first thing is that immediacy is real and Moravian studies were true and McCroskey followed in his footsteps. But I think also the idea that I have and many of you have probably seen is I've never realized how hard working some of my colleagues are to the fault of like, girl, you need to stop or you're going to get sick kind of thing. Like people working around the clock to make sure that their experience for their students has been flawless. And so

it's really exposed I think just how good our careers are and how good and hardworking some of our colleagues are. And that makes me kind of, I don't know, kind of happy.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah. No, that's great. Alanna, what do you think? What are our big takeaways from pandemic life?

Alanna Gillis:
One of my biggest takeaways has been an even deeper commitment to universal design for learning. So the idea that I should make my class accessible to all students so that no one needs to request accommodation. So we already know students are dealing with a lot of things outside of their lives that impact them. My teaching philosophy is that a student is a person first and a student second. So if there's something interfering with their ability to be a successful student, that's more important and that's what should be addressed first. And then we can work together to help them succeed in my class. And I think trying to think through even more structures that are potentially creating unnecessary barriers. And so, for instance, with quizzes, making all quizzes untimed so then students don't have to request individual accommodations for the fact that they need extra time and instead making it so that all students can universally access our classes or not penalizing students in their participation grade for needing a mental health day whether that be because of a mental health crisis because a student of color who's struggled with yet another police shooting. All these sort of things to build in the structures that individual students don't have the burden of asking me for it but instead me thinking through how can I structure my classes so that it is accessible for everyone from the get-go.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
That's sort of the manifestation of Shannon's extension of grace I think, recognizing that maybe all those old standards and expectations that we had don't need to be quite so rigidly held to. Mindy, what do you think? What's your big takeaway from the pandemic year?

Mindy Fenske:
Yeah. I would like to just echo what was just said about grace and changing the ways which my expectations, I want them to be performed. And so it's not a lowering of expectations. It's a changing of the measure of how they are performed. And so that goes back to one of those best practices things. Because yeah, like one of the things I'm going to bring forward is like have online quizzes that they can take whenever they want to so that they can do that. And plus, I don't have to waste class time necessarily on that. We can do something better in the in-person environment than sitting and writing on a piece of paper. But those are the micro things. Macro things, responsiveness is one lesson both on a pragmatic level, like being more responsive to things like

communication, like responding to emails, and that kind of stuff but also a responsiveness, so that's a responsiveness with students, a responsiveness to colleagues when they ask for help. And like I don't know if I can help you necessarily but I'm going to try to do what I can. And then also a responsiveness to self and with self-care. Because we have mental health days too, right? And we'll be better for our students if we do that for ourselves. Second thing is adaptation. The capacity to adapt creatively and with consideration, right? Not just haphazardly. And so to think about constraints as being creative opportunities as opposed to things to resist. And so technological constraints, time constraints. I mean how do we use those? Let's create a possibility. And then finally a new understanding of time. I've been filling out all the surveys, that all the people doing all the studies about teaching and research in the academy have been sending me. I've been trying to participate in that research so that the data gets collected. And some of the questions have been really interesting about time. Like prior to the pandemic, how many hours a week did you spend on X and how much time did you spend on X. And I'm like there's no hours during a pandemic, right? And if you're working from home, there's not an eight-hour thing. You're working potentially all the time. And so you're moving from being in a Zoom call to letting the dog out to making dinner to go and teach your kids on Zoom to taking care of an elderly parent to helping a neighbor and then going back to your research and then going back to your teaching. That can all happen within the expanse of 60 minutes. So a different understanding of time and work that I hope gets propelled into the future. Because this notion of hours doesn't work in a lot of academic disciplines and in teaching.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah. I've asked more than a few people who've wished me a good weekend, I'm like what is this thing you're calling a weekend? Those have gone away.

Vinita Agarwal:
That's such a momentous question. I think I would, if I had to put one word to it and expand on that, I would say to look at the people in my classroom and you can fill in with colleagues as well and our administrators and everyone in our community, as a whole person, as someone who's looking at that learning environment, as not just a brain who's come to your class but who's coming in there with certain struggles and that are embedded in their daily life, in their particular identities, to be mindful of their differences. And one of the things that came up in this regard in our Teaching and Learning Council meeting was include all of these things in the kind of difficult conversations that sometimes can be drawn out through our class content. So not to shy away from those discussions. Include them in where those intersections come in and to communicate with your presence a certain amount of compassion towards these issues and willingness to be vulnerable to them.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I love it. Compassion, grace, flexibility, time, all really important ways that the pandemic has taught us I hope in the end to be better students and better learners and better teachers all around the globe and in our classrooms. So thank you all so much. This has been a great discussion and I really think people will benefit and profit from hearing your thoughts about what we've learned from this interesting year that we've been through. So thank you so much for joining us. And listeners, thank you again for tuning in to this special episode of *Communication Matters*. You can learn more about NCA's public programs by visiting the public's programs page on the NCA website at natcom.org/PublicPrograms. And as always, be sure to subscribe to *Communication Matters* wherever you listen to your podcasts. Thanks again for joining us again on *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast.*

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Trevor Parry-Giles:
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Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles. The podcast, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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