



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 15: Conversation with Director of the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison
Mary Gould

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

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles

Mary Gould

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RECORDING BEGINS

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

In this episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*, I'm speaking with Mary Gould. Dr. Gould is currently on leave from the Department of Communication at St. Louis University and is serving as the director of The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, an organization that works to promote high quality higher education programs in prison by supporting both practitioners and students. In this episode, Dr. Gould discusses the alliance's work, the importance of promoting post-secondary education in prisons and the relevance of communication research and teaching to expanding higher education programs in the prison setting. First, a bit more about Dr. Gould. Dr. Gould researches and teaches on issues related to communication, community engagement and higher education in prisons. Prior to joining the alliance as director, Dr. Gould was a member of its founding board and served as co-chair of its strategic planning process. Dr. Gould has previously volunteered with The Missouri Department of Corrections and The Federal Bureau of Prisons and was a member of The Institute for Higher Education Policies Higher Education in Prison advisory council. Dr. Gould is also a former



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director of the St. Louis University Prison Education Program. Hi, Mary, and welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Mary Gould:

Hi, Trevor. Thank you so much. Thanks for the introduction and for having me here. I'm really happy to be a part of this conversation today.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I think it's really important work that you're doing and I'm pleased that we're able to highlight on *Communication Matters*. But before we discuss the work of The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, could you tell us a little bit about how you came to be the director and what experiences led you to this position and how it all happened? I think our listeners would be really interested to know how that transition happened.

Mary Gould:

Absolutely. As you described in the introduction, my research prior to coming to the alliance and throughout my both graduate work and academic work at St. Louis University focused on studying the prison system in the United States and pretty quickly within the first actually semester I think I started, there was a small group of faculty who were already teaching courses inside prison in Missouri and I got involved with them and really that sort of started my work in higher ed in prison which I think really was just an extension of my interest in understanding the U.S. prison system and the opportunity to teach with this program and eventually direct the program really led me to a small cohort of practitioners and faculty and teachers from across the country who were all doing similar work teaching in prisons. And at that time 2009 to 2010, it was a really small community. There were not near as many programs as there are today and it really just started as a group of colleagues getting together in some cases once a year at a very small I mean I call it an annual conference. I think the first conference had 75 people in attendance. And it was just continuing to meet and talk to each other and so many of our early conversations were just around trying to learn what each other were doing and how everyone was running their program.

And continuously we just kept saying to each other we need more opportunities to talk, we need more opportunities to create community, we need more opportunities to share resources. So, as communication professionals, you start to hear well, we needed a network, we needed a community. And so, for me, that's really what inspired my thinking around what role can I play in helping to form a group, a collective. At that point, we didn't really know what it looked like and it took a number of years. We really started in earnest to think about the alliance in about 2014/2015 when the community of people running and teaching and programs continued to



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expand. So, there's just a growing number of folks I think at the 2013/2014 national conference. There were close to 300 people there. So, you really see the momentum even from 2009 to 2013. And it was just more of the sense of we need a way to be organized and support each other. So, it just played really nicely into my interest in communication and in studying culture and the formation of community. I was doing a lot of work within the prisons at that point. I was helping to administer the program, The Higher Education in Prison Program at St. Louis University. And in my classes, I was constantly teaching courses on community engagement and intercultural communication and just sort of really focusing on social inequity and injustice and bringing my teaching in from the work that I was doing in the prison system. So, I always think of my work to help form the alliance in this national network as a real intersection of all of the work that I was doing previously. I really do think about it as solidly a project of the work we do in the field of communication.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, the alliance brings together all of these people I assume across disciplines. So, it's not just communication scholars but brings them all together. What kind of resources and opportunities does the alliance provide particularly through this national conference particularly in this era of virtual conferencing? Are you still able to provide the kind of resources and opportunities to those of our colleagues who are teaching in prisons around the country?

Mary Gould:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, Trevor, as you're saying, I mean the alliance in this national network is really a project that squarely fits within the work that we do in the field of communication against so much of not just what we're doing right now in the context of COVID and not being able to meet in person and we do host a national conference. The National Conference on Higher Education in Prison started in 2010 and was hosted each year by a different program. And so, it was just hosted across the country by different programs who offered to host. It was usually on campus. We wanted to get to the 300-350 people. We almost started to exceed the capacity of a campus. In 2017, the alliance began hosting The National Conference on Higher Education in Prison and we've hosted it each year since. We were scheduled to host this year in 2020 and have instead moved to a series of virtual events. I think we're trying to avoid using the concept of a virtual conference. I'm not sure a virtual conference is really the thing that would work.

So, we are going to host a series of panel discussions, keynote events, probably some workshops. We're working on the details here. But really the idea is to draw on the value of this conference annually which is building a network. As you're describing, everyone working within higher education in in prison comes from a variety of backgrounds, folks who are teaching or



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administering programs. It's a really multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach. Current and former students are engaged in coursework across the academy. So, there is no centralized or sort of home location and in part, that's what the alliance is growing into becoming. And so, much of the idea for the founding of this organization really was to be I often described as sort of a quasi-professional development and academic organization. There is no central academic home for work in higher education in prison which makes it challenging. Folks are coming to this work with all sorts of different academic backgrounds, all sorts of community-based experiences. So, we really are trying to be a home for a real range of thinking, of ideas, of ways of approaching this work and again, just to go back to the strong connection to I think some of the roots of working communication which really is building connections, building networks, building identity across really different life and professional experiences.

So, the conference is one of the ways that we do that. I often think the networking opportunities are the most important parts of the conference because someone who's running a higher education in prison program on a campus is likely the only person on their campus running that type of program and sometimes in their city and sometimes in their state. With so few programs across the country, three to four hundred programs, you're not finding a program often in your city or in your state. So, the conference really becomes that place for shared learning and networking and innovation and throughout the year in between the conference or any other types of larger either national or regional events, the idea is really for the alliance to become a home space for the same kind of work. We recently launched a journal, *The Journal of Higher Education in Prison* which will be an interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary academic, peer-reviewed journal, the only journal solely focused on the work of higher education in prison. And in part, the idea is to create a theoretical and practice-based home for work and thinking in the field. The other sort of production of reports and research and collecting data, this year we launched a survey of all higher education in prison programs and in part, it's just to answer some simple questions. I mean I sort of paused on the number of programs there are. At this point, it's just a guess. There's no clear count on how many programs, there's no clear collection of resources or materials from programs or understanding of even the work that each program is doing. So, we're also very much a nascent or forming group and in practice.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. You've nicely articulated I think the value of academic conferences of any kind, right? It's less about the sort of presentation of research and more about the sharing, the innovation, the networking and the interactions, just knowing that there are other people out there who do what you do in what can often be a very lonely experience. I'm also impressed with the alliance's work on changing the conversation around higher education in prison because I think a lot of our listeners and many people in general might have a certain



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stereotype or a set of stigmatic understandings of what prison life and incarceration and what formerly incarcerated individuals are all about and it seems like the alliance is doing some work in this regard particularly with The Story Center. And I'm curious if you could talk as a communication scholar here about how your experiences and background inform that work and how The Story Center seeks to challenge and work against some of these stereotypes that so often figure into how people view higher education in prison, prisons in general, etc.?

Mary Gould:

Yeah, absolutely. Some of my earliest work in thinking about and doing research in the U.S. prison system actually focused on mediated representations and I was really interested in some of the questions that I think we're facing right now. I mean it's this very interesting cultural moment where *Cops* is coming off the air. I mean 33 years on the air and now all of a sudden, I mean I think these are like really important questions for communication scholars in particular. So, *Cops* is going to come off the air and maybe *Brooklyn 99* and some of these other television shows and how many seasons and spin-offs in *Law and Order* have there been. And some of the earliest research I did in the U.S. prison system at the intersection of communication studies was to ask questions about how is it possible that an active and engaged citizenry can make really important decisions about policing and law enforcement and judicial litigation having almost no understanding of this system?

I mean prisons and people who are incarcerated are geographically and ideologically removed from sort of everyday life and it's not an accident that prisons are mostly located in really remote locations and far outside of cities. So, to think that people who are not currently incarcerated or do not have loved ones or family members and friends who are experiencing incarceration, to think that they can come to know this system in an informed and enlightened way just based on what we have on television and film and in the media or museums without ever perhaps meeting someone who's been incarcerated, going themselves to a prison is ludicrous to think that that's how an informed public can exist. So, part of the work that we're trying to do is just create alternative opportunities for engagement and critical conversations about this system and that absolutely has to involve people who are connected to the system, people with lived experience, people who are currently incarcerated and formally incarcerated, to hear these voices and experiences who have lived this system and can tell a very different story than what you will see on television or in a film and that's part of this work.

It's part of the work to ensure that prisons are not a secret and people who are incarcerated, people who come into contact with the criminal legal system are not kept outside. So, it's a really important part of this work and it's an important part of dismantling the prison system. You have to know the people whose lives are most touched by the system historically and forever



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and increasingly so. That's black and brown people and people who are minoritized in this country, people that are economically and socially disenfranchised and again, at the intersection of higher education, people that have been historically excluded and intentionally excluded from access to higher education.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It's interesting. It sounds to me like this is a multi-stage process. When we talk about higher education in prisons, we need to retell the stories of incarcerated individuals and what incarceration means and what it's all about. And then that gets us to a bigger and broader discussion perhaps about the importance of equity and the importance of excellence in these higher education programs in prison. And I know you co-authored, Mary, a report on this from the alliance. What are some of the more important aspects of a higher education program in prison that can promote equity and greater degrees of excellence after we've told the story of what incarceration is all about?

Mary Gould:

So, I think one of the biggest myths associated with higher education in prison and maybe it's prison in general, everything's always framed as a second chance and if you frame something as a second chance, it necessitates that there was a first chance and I would go to great lengths to argue with anyone who suggests that across the board or on average or majority of the people who are currently incarcerated had a first chance, had a first chance at quality higher education or just quality education in their lives. There's no statistic that supports that. If we look at not just completion in higher education but just any opportunities in higher education, it's somewhere below 15% of 2.2-2.3 million people on any given day in the U.S. prison system who have had some post-secondary education which is in comparison to closer to 40% of the general public.

So, I think one of the first places to start is really debunking this idea that prisons are full of people who have had opportunities in their lives. Prisons are full of people who have been persistently and systemically excluded and decentralized and de-prioritized and under-resourced and minoritized in our communities. So, we can't go into prisons or think about work within prisons and think this is a second chance for anyone. So, if we approach this as a first chance and even if we're approach it as the second or third or fourth or eighteenth chance, I still would argue it needs to be high quality. For people listening, think about the opportunities you want for your children. What do those look like? And I assume you can start to articulate what a high quality educational experience looks like.



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So, for us and for the work of the alliance, we're both making that argument that access, that equity and that quality should be within the context of the prison and certainly, the context itself does start to define in some ways how you can do your work. And just as a very quick example, I mean I would say first of all, even this moment with COVID and what's happening on college campuses and the move to either distance or remote learning, in most prisons across the country it's just not possible. So, we have a real crisis right now in higher education in prison thinking about how we're going to continue the continuity of programming and there are certainly opportunities to make more robust arguments about the need and access for technology but also continuing to make those arguments about why face-to-face instruction is so meaningful and important for students which I think are the some of the same arguments we're trying to make on the outside campus.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right.

Mary Gould:

And we can't fully do all the work that we want to do with the quality that we want to do it as educators if we are fully remote.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And add to that the technology gap that you identify as existing for a lot of folks who are incarcerated. It becomes a double whammy. You indicate that many of the folks who are incarcerated do not or have not had access to post-secondary classes. What's the experience like for them? I mean it must be pretty amazing or boring or I don't know. I'm just really interested in what those experiences of taking classes are like for the folks who are incarcerated. Again, we have this romanticized image probably, kind of a Michelle Pfeiffer sort of thing where a teacher comes in and opens up great minds and the world changes and everything's wonderful. I'm suspecting that the real lived experience is a little different.

Mary Gould:

Yeah. I mean absolutely, Trevor. And I'll just continue with like my myth busting. Everything that happens in the outside classroom happens on the inside classroom in so many ways and again, this is just my personal experience as an instructor and based upon conversations that I've had with students and I'm sure every student—I mean just like on the outside campus—every student's going to have their different experience of the classroom. One of the ways in which I've often described the distinction is I think the students that I've taught, there's an immediacy to their understanding of the value of the educational opportunity that they're receiving, my students inside in the prisons. There's an immediacy versus my students on the outside who I



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think where anyone who teaches knows the experience of getting an email from a student three years, five years, seven years later who was in your class and says oh, that thing you taught me, it makes sense now.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right. It changed my life.

Mary Gould:

Yes, that conversation we had and I'm using that thing at my office now or in my family. That's I think a very common experience on an outside campus where especially if you're teaching sort of what quote unquote we've always called the traditional college student which I think is now also a myth we can debunk, but if we're thinking about 18 to 24 year olds straight from high school, limited lived experience, probably hasn't suffered that much, a lot of what they're learning in the classroom is sort of like they're banking it for later maybe. The students again that I've worked with and taught inside and I think probably others have had this experience, they've had different lived experiences. They're typically older, not always the case but they've lived more. They have more ways to contextualize the information and I think particularly for myself teaching communication courses, I've taught small group communication, I've taught public speaking, in many cases, they have not had the experience of quality teaching and learning. So, they've not had that full 12 years or 18 years, pre-K through 12th grade that many students come to college with. They haven't had that background. So, their understanding of what it means for an instructor or teacher to give them feedback is very different. So, in some ways, sometimes there are those romanticized experiences and we certainly try to talk teachers down from those moments. We have a lot of people who teach in prison who will come out and say these are the best students I've ever had. This is the only place I want to teach now because they're gripped by what I'm saying or the activities. And it's like well, okay, sure, but the reason is because you are a novelty.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. Right.

Mary Gould:

You are the first teacher that they had that gave them written feedback on a paper.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right.



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Mary Gould:

But if they stay in this program, they're going to hopefully come into contact with every single teacher who listens to them and cares about them and they're also learning in a completely dehumanized experience. So, when they come into their classroom and you treat them, your students in your class as they should be treated, as people with respect and dignity and humanity, you're doing that and it's coming across and being read as something wildly different than what the other conditions of their lives are. That doesn't mean there's anything special about you. It just means they're being completely subjugated in their other lived experience. So, yes, the classroom becomes a space that often students will say was transformative, it was humanizing. But that shouldn't be what we as educators rest upon or valorize. We should see that as problematic.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It occurs to me too that everybody I've known who's taught in prison in higher education and prison programs has been in the humanities or the social sciences. Is that a correct perception or do they get business classes? Do they get STEM courses? This just occurred to me as you're talking because a lot of that humanizing comes about because we're talking about human things like literature and communication and things along those lines. Do they get a real broad range of higher education in the prison classroom?

Mary Gould:

Yeah. The range of opportunities is actually really expansive. You're absolutely right that many programs skew towards the humanities or towards a more liberal arts or general ed. The majority of higher education and prison programs that are doing for credit or degree granting programs are associates degrees. A lot of those programs and degrees are also career technical and pre-professional programs and certifications. But you're right and again, I can't speak in certainties because we just don't have the data yet on the programs but I think when it does come back within this next year as we continue to survey programs, there will definitely be a stronger inclination towards the humanities and social sciences. But at the same time, if you want to say there are strong pushes right now around STEM in higher education in prison. And so, I think again as much as prisons are removed from the community and are distant from campus, either the same opportunities, the same crises, the same dramas that we see on the campus on the outside, we'll see on the inside as well. So, as we started to see in higher ed in prison and I think it's great.

I think the more opportunity that we can give people and the more choice. It's really about choice and it's one of the detriments of having so few programs is that the choice that exists inside is so, it's the most just, you can't even compare it to the choice that's on the outside of the



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range of opportunities or the range of degree programs. And that's also something that we're really trying to help encourage and to broaden is just the amount of opportunities that there are. And so, with so few programs, you can have one university in a state running a program and they could be in one, two or three prisons and maybe they have 20 students in each program. Your state could have—I mean I was running a program in Missouri with for round numbers 30,000 people incarcerated in 21 institutions and there were two universities doing this work. So, if you have 100 people, 200 people who have the opportunity and you have 30,000 people in a state and now obviously maybe, certainly there are people who have already completed degrees who are in prison and there are people who are working towards adult basic and GED programs. But the bulk of the population was likely eligible to participate in programming.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. And as we talk about this, I find myself increasingly worried that COVID represents a sort of existential threat to a lot of these programs, not just the technology dimensions to it but so many colleges and universities are facing significant funding issues in the next year or two. And I can't help but fret that the first thing to go would be a program about higher education in prisons, for example. Is that true? Am I right to be worried? Is this a concern? I'm certain that the alliance is concerned about this as well.

Mary Gould:

Absolutely. I think everything that's happening right now is something to be concerned about for higher education in prison programs. COVID, racism, enrollments, they're all something to be concerned about. Related to COVID, obviously first and foremost, the thing to be worried about is that the safety and health and well-being of people incarcerated. It is a massive humanitarian health crisis that's happening in prisons right now and it is not getting the attention that it deserves. And so, that is I think forefront on every single person's mind who works within a prison. Second is the access to students right now, access to education and access to communication and students within program is not a priority within most departments of corrections. And so, programs across the country are just scrambling to stay in contact and do what I think is probably one of the most if not the most valuable thing that a higher education in prison program does is it remains a connection to the outside for students, remains a resource of reliable and transparent information which is very difficult for people who are incarcerated to have access to.

And then there's just the general academic opportunities from the opportunities for other experiences and again, humanizing experiences and experiences that are generative and not debilitating which is most of the remaining experiences on the inside. And then I think that any time that there is a concern on the part of departments of corrections about—I mean safety and



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security is their foremost concern. Current political and cultural moment and the real sort of reckoning around systemic racism, that is an inherent threat inside prisons. Anyone running a higher education in prison program will tell you that there is a challenge even talking about race and racism and systemic and generational oppression and the sort of historical legacies of racism and oppression in the United States. It is very difficult to talk about these issues inside prisons. And so, it's always a threat to continue knowledge and engagement with students.

And then I think, as you're talking about, Trevor, the financial situation, I think the one maybe—I don't know, think about this as a positive—higher education in prison programs I think are really important to colleges and universities. I think they always have been. I know from my own personal experience. I said in the beginning of running our program, I sort of had some of these same thoughts like oh, this program is going to go away as soon as there are budget cuts or there have been budget cuts since. I mean I started my academic job in 2009 so I think I've constantly been in the experience of budget cuts. And so, it's been really reassuring to know that how much my university, St. Louis University valued the program and was committed to the program and really saw and sees and continues to see the program as an extension of its mission and a commitment to being an engaged and responsible member of the community.

And I think now more than ever, universities, every college and university in this country is going to have to reckon with its history and I can't imagine that there is a college or university in this country that somewhere in its history does not have a history of abuse and oppression and systemic injustice and exclusion from any number of minoritized communities in this country. So, whether it was the colleges and universities that were kept afloat because of slavery or built by people who were enslaved or because they were built upon lands stolen from indigenous people, there are reckonings that are going to have to happen across the country and you can't engage in a reckoning on racism in the United States without also looking at the prison system. So, this intersection of the history and the histories of racism and oppression on college and university campuses and the history of the racist undertones and structure of the U.S. prison system, you can't untwine these two and you can't say why is it that when we look at our enrollments across the board in higher ed, we don't see black and brown students and other people of color on our campus. Well, where do we find them? We look to the prison system.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. No, I think that's right and that especially speaks to I know St. Louis University is a private Catholic institution. And so, it makes sense that its mission would be furthered by a program of this type. The same could be said for a land-grant institution anywhere in the country and recognizing those connections all within the context of COVID-19. I mean there is so much here about systemic racism and mass incarceration and health disparities. And I really want to



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reinforce what you said about the fact that the impact of COVID-19 on prison populations is underreported. I heard a report just the other day about an outbreak in California's prison system I believe that is accounting for a not insignificant percentage of the current spike that they're seeing in cases out in California. And well, as with so many things with regards to prisons, it is dramatically underreported. Wow. A lot to think about and a lot of different aspects of our current moment folding in on each other and in the end, I guess we just owe you and The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison a great deal of thanks for tackling head-on these challenging issues and doing so from the perspective of a communications scholar-teacher makes us all at NCA anyway very proud that you're doing the work that you're doing. So, thank you, Mary Gould very much for joining me today.

Mary Gould:

Great. Thank you so much, Trevor, and I know you'll be sharing resources and links to the Alliance's work and I think that perhaps the last thing to say to listeners is that this is a really great time to think about where you're putting your energies, where the university is putting its energies and what are the ways in which you can get involved and be part of I think the critical work to really addressing the systemic inequalities not just broadly in our culture but very specifically on our campuses across the country. So, I encourage folks to continue to think about their roles and opportunities that might be available to them.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And listeners, I do hope you've enjoyed this very thought-provoking discussion about The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and what higher education in prison really means for those millions of incarcerated individuals.

In NCA news, registration is now open for the 2020 NCA Annual Convention themed Communication at the Crossroads. The convention has been reimagined to allow all presenters and other attendees to select whether they will attend in person or participate virtually. You can register today at natcom.org/convention. That's natcom.org/convention.

In recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCA executive committee has approved two important initiatives. First, the association is suspending all 2020 convention registration fees for NCA members and second, 50% membership discounts have been implemented for all members who make less than \$100,000 annually and who join NCA or renew their membership in 2020. For more information, please visit natcom.org/membership.

And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for a bonus episode of *Communication Matters* on July 27th featuring Rachel Alicia Griffin and Jonathan P. Rossing, guest co-editors of a special issue of



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NCA's journal *Review of Communication* about the 2018 Disney and Marvel film Black Panther. The episode will delve into a variety of topics related to Black Panther such as the representation of various communities within the African diaspora. So, join us on July 27th for another fascinating episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies 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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