



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 49: Expanding Educational Opportunities Beyond the Classroom

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

Participants:

LaKesha Anderson
Judy Pearson
Jeffrey Ringer

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Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*.

Dr. Shari Miles-Cohen:

Hello, I'm Dr. Shari Miles-Cohen, Executive Director of the National Communication Association. And I'm your host on *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. Thank you for joining us for today's episode.

LaKesha Anderson:

Hi, Judy, and welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Judy Pearson:

Hi, LaKesha. I am really happy to be here today for this discussion. Thanks for having us.

LaKesha Anderson:

Hi, Jeff, and welcome to the podcast.

Jeffrey Ringer:

Thank you, LaKesha. I'm pleased to be here, and I look forward to our talk.

LaKesha Anderson:

This is an exciting gift for St. Cloud and the Department of Communication Studies. Judy, you received your undergraduate degree from St. Cloud. Could you tell me a little bit more about your experience as an undergraduate? For instance, what type of courses did you take and what activities were you involved in?

Judy Pearson:

That's a great place to start, LaKeshia. I was a first-generation college student in my family, so I didn't know anything about what I was doing, what I was up to when I went to St. Cloud State. As a matter of fact, I was so naïve that when I registered for classes in the summer of 1968, I was told to sign up for 16 credit hours, and I did as I was told. But I really wondered about the schedule that I'd laid out for myself. I calculated that I'd be in class between 40 and 50 hours each week, and I wondered when I would have time to study and how could I prepare for class, write papers, and be ready for exams? Of course, I did not realize that the courses only met two or three times each week, but totally without any knowledge of what college meant. And it kind of exemplifies that I guess.

My coursework was no different from others majoring in speech and theater at the time. I enjoyed the full range of classes we took from public speaking to oral interp to radio and television and even speech pathology. Well, since the department also housed both speech and theater courses, I also took a full range of theater classes. Umbrella departments like the one at St. Cloud were common in the 1960s. The advantage, of course, was the breadth of offerings. The disadvantage was a lack of depth in any single area. For me, it was perfect, at least for the undergraduate foundation. I was involved with many activities at St. Cloud. I participated in individual events and competed regionally. And since we had no debate at my small high school, I never did become a debater. On the other hand, I hosted a jazz program on St. Cloud State's radio station. I served as master carpenter for one play, I helped make costumes for another, and I performed in many of the plays that we put on that year or those years. I also ran for and became a student senator.

This last experience allowed me to attend the National Student Association Conference at the University of Maryland. This is my first plane trip and introduce me to a new world. We were invited to Congress. Then we've been a number of United States Senators. The two who impressed me most were Teddy Kennedy from Massachusetts and Frank Church from Idaho. We also were introduced to people in the news. Bernie Sanders spoke at the convention along with Timothy Leary. Although controversial, they both left a lasting impression.

LaKeshia Anderson:

Thinking back, how did your experience at St. Cloud shape your life and career?

Judy Pearson:

St. Cloud was a real turning point for me. I transitioned from being a fairly, academically strong, small town high school girl to becoming a more mature student with heightened aspirations. Though the trip to the University of Maryland was minimal, it did begin my interest in other people and other places. One of my professors at St. Cloud, actually a technical theater person, suggested I go to graduate school. I didn't know anything about graduate school, but he told me that I would not pay for tuition and I would most likely receive a stipend. This opened another door. I received a National Defense Education grant, which would lead to a direct entry doctoral program. The faculty at St. Cloud not only provided important disciplinary content, but they also helped me build relationships within the discipline. They had studied with Paul Boase at Oberlin,

who is now at Ohio University and with Raymond G. Smith and J. Jeffrey Auer, who were then at Indiana. Ultimately, I chose Indiana for both my master's degree and my doctoral work because of these relationships, and I felt very comfortable going to Ohio U later to be on the faculty with Paul Boase as a mentor.

LaKesha Anderson:

What does St. Cloud mean to you, Judy? What are some of the reasons that you decided to give back to your alma mater?

Judy Pearson:

I have already indicated that St. Cloud State served as a turning point in my life, and it was really a launching pad for my career. I mentioned earlier that I had not traveled on a plane when I came to St. Cloud. Now I have traveled to all seven continents into well over 100 countries. I've seen koalas and kangaroos in Australia, even carried a joey in a pillowcase for a day. I fed the lemurs in Madagascar, photograph the blue-footed boobies in the Galapagos Islands. And I like to tell people that I do love blue-footed boobies. There is a kind of conversation stopper. The blue monkeys in Tanzania stole our breakfast from our insecure huts and shared our lunch and picnic areas. I've provided service and education to people in Nigeria, Tanzania, Malaysia, and South Africa. I've organized or participated in conferences in Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Jerusalem, Rome, South Africa, Mexico, Canada, Japan, and Thailand.

So St. Cloud allowed me to learn more about my academic discipline, but it also taught me about people and about places. This learning has a multiplier effect for me and for the students who I've had the privilege of teaching. My students who have fallen in love with the discipline, they fall in love with people and with travel. Last week, I was on the phone with one of my former students who shared that his trip to teach in Brazil had just been canceled because of COVID. And Jeff Ringer, who's with us today, leaves for Denmark on Tuesday. And my husband and I travel to Greece on a Mediterranean cruise on Thursday. This gives us a way to acknowledge the importance of the institution in shaping my life. On a personal note, Jeff Ringer was one of my students at Ohio University, and he became the chair at St. Cloud State. Though our lives can be diagramed going forward in a straight line, they also seem to progress in circles. When we move forward, we are also frequently looping back to repeat activities and to renew acquaintances.

Jeff's vision of the department, his views on travel, and expanding students' opportunities parallel my own. How fortunate we have been to name the department together. This gift has also provided a purpose to my life at this stage. I flunked retirement, I should tell you, and I needed a new goal. When I recognized how much I love teaching, I began to write textbooks. My reasoning was that I could teach even more students. Now the profits from those textbooks expands other students' opportunities. Higher education costs have soared since I attended undergraduate school. Many students in the Upper Midwest may not be able to afford college today. This gift should give them a boost.

LaKesha Anderson:

What is your hope for what this gift will do for students in the St. Cloud Department of Communication?

Judy Pearson:

I'm hoping that communication has an even more predominant role at St. Cloud than it has before. I arrived at the university 60 years ago, and the reputation was strong. With this new name and incarnation, I trust that it will sustain its standing for decades to come. The cost of a college education has increased markedly from the 1960s. At the same time, the federal government and state governments continue to invest less and less. Universities that were formerly state supported are now merely state located. Those of us who have benefited from particular institutions are now obligated to pay the gift forward. The next undergraduate student class will benefit by our gifts.

The gift is intended to do three things for the students. First, provide financial support for their education. Second, to provide travel funds so that they can expand their horizons beyond Stearns County and Minnesota. And third, to allow attendance at national and international meetings so they can understand the breadth of the discipline. All of these actions will encourage students to enroll and matriculate at St. Cloud State. The falling number of students in St. Cloud suggests the time is now for this gift. The university will be in a position to shape the students' futures. What I consider the many ways that I have spent money, this is perhaps the wisest.

LaKesha Anderson:

Judy has pledged \$1 million to the Department of Communications at St. Cloud. I understand that the proceeds of this endowment will support a variety of programs. Jeff, could you tell me about some of the programs that the proceeds from this endowment will support?

Jeffrey Ringer:

Sure. When we first contemplated what we would do with the proceeds from this endowment, we decided to develop some specific goals. And so we created six goals that are an expansion of the three objectives that Judy listed. One of those goals is to encourage undergraduate scholarship. Another is to recruit more students. Another is to reward excellence, expose students to leading scholars in the field, encourage global thinking and understanding, and support student development. Almost all of the money will go directly to students. The only money that doesn't go directly to students will be for speakers and visiting professors. But most of the money will be in scholarships based on those six criteria.

LaKesha Anderson:

Two of the areas of support that Judy mentioned were conference travel and international education. Is this plan still going forward?

Judy Pearson:

Yes, that's an important one. Over the years working here at St. Cloud State, we always have some outstanding undergraduate students like Judy, but other students as well. And we've often

contemplated supporting them to go to national conferences or regional conferences. But finding that funding was difficult and challenging. It's hard enough to find faculty development money, let alone to support student travel at conferences. And so it was always a challenge to do that. We're basically an undergraduate department. And so we don't have a lot of grant money or support money for students other than our professional development for ourselves. So this will allow us to support students to go to actually any of either the state conference, the regional conference, or the national conference. So that's one of the things that I'm most happy about because we've just never been able to do it. And we can all name like two or three students who really have a good background, really have a strong sense of identity, and would do well in a discipline. But we just had a difficult time supporting them. So now we've got a framework that will allow them to participate in conferences.

LaKesha Anderson:

You also mentioned that guest speakers will be supported by this gift, Jeff. Do you have an idea of what kinds of guest speakers students at St. Cloud would be interested in hearing? And what will funding these speakers mean to students?

Jeffrey Ringer:

Yes. This is a particularly useful one as well. So since I mentioned, we don't have a lot of extra funding for the department. We really just have basic funding to cover our needs. And having money for speakers is going to be really appreciated. Most of the speakers that we'd like to bring are people who reflect contemporary issues. So at the moment, we're dealing with this COVID environment. And just as in a recent NCA podcast, you discussed a disciplinary approach to why people are not persuaded by the research about the vaccinations and so forth. So those kinds of speakers would be the kinds of speakers that we would bring. Yet there's a strong interest in social justice as well. And so bringing in speakers to reflect local issues. We've had struggles in Minnesota with police and people of color and so forth. So contemporary issues like that, reflecting social justice are the kinds of speakers that we'd like to bring in.

LaKesha Anderson:

College enrollments have declined because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jeff, how might this gift help in recruiting and retaining students at St. Cloud?

Jeffrey Ringer:

Yes. What we're going to do is we're going to set aside some scholarships for students who are brand new to the university. So new entering freshmen who declare comm studies as a major will be eligible for a scholarship. And then we have new entry transfer students as well. So in the first year, we're setting aside two scholarships for entering freshmen and two scholarships for new entry transfer students. And then we're going to assess how it goes after that. Communication studies tends to be a discipline that students discover when they get to campus as opposed to one that they seek out before they come to campus. And so recognizing that, we're hoping that this might have a bit of an influence on those few students who are looking to major in communications studies at universities, that this may persuade them to come to St. Cloud. And so all of our plans are tentative because we want to see how the awards work after a year or two.

Maybe we'll end up putting more money into those awards or less money. It might shift to something else and so forth. But we're starting with scholarships for both new entering freshmen and new entering transfer students.

LaKesha Anderson:

Proceeds will also support visiting professors. Are there any academic specialties within communication that you're particularly interested in supporting? And how will this help meet the needs of St. Cloud students, Jeff?

Jeffrey Ringer:

Sure. I'm hoping that we bring in people who reflect Judy's background. So Judy spent her career researching things like gender and communication, interpersonal communication in the basic course. So I'm hoping that we're able to bring in scholars who reflect those areas. We also have a strong performance studies section. And since Judy took classes in theater, I think it's kind of a nice tie-in to teach students about advocacy through performance and so on. And our students respond well to those kinds of guest speakers. So I think those are the two areas that I'd like to see the department move in in the future.

LaKesha Anderson:

It sounds like this support will be transformational for the department in many ways. What does this donation mean to you, Jeff?

Jeffrey Ringer:

Yeah, I agree. It will be transformational. I'm thinking several things. First is a strong vote of confidence. Here we have one of the leading scholars in the discipline investing \$1,000,000 in our department. That says that she feels we are a strong department and capable of using that money effectively. So it's a clear vote of confidence. And as you said, enrollments have been dropping, which means that budgets are tight. And Judy alluded to the fact that legislatures are reducing the amount of funds that they spend on universities. So our budgets are tight, and there's a little bit of stress over people requesting money and which departments are going to get the little bit of money that's available. So having something like this, the president of our university sees that one of our alumni is willing to invest so much money in our department, it tells the world that people have confidence in us and who we are. So that's, I think, the first thing that helps make this a transformational decision.

The second thing is it's a great mark of distinction. We will be the only named department of university, possibly the only named department in the system, and that says something. We're proud of that fact, and we're looking forward to the prestige that comes with that distinction. And personally, Judy mentioned that things come in cycles. So I spent the beginning of my career, working with Judy and her husband, Paul. I co-wrote teachers manuals to their textbooks, two of them. We wrote essays together. We presented at conferences together. We had a strong beginning to my career because of her. And here at the end of my career, I'm working with her again on another program that's going to make a huge difference in people's lives. I've used her basic course textbook the entire time I've taught at St. Cloud State University. And so now the

funds that were generated by those purchases are coming back to future students at St. Cloud State. I just think that's a fantastic cycle. And as Judy says, it's just very virtuous. And I'm very honored that we have that possibility here at St. Cloud State.

LaKesha Anderson:

A really great full circle story. For those who don't know, St. Cloud has about 12,000 students. How many students does the Department of Communications serve? And what does a gift of this size mean to the department?

Jeffrey Ringer:

We have probably somewhere in the nature of 125-150 students. We offer certificates, minors, and several different majors. And so we have students taking a number of different programs. And so I think for these students, it shows them that there's a confidence in the department. So they will have a mark of distinction in their careers as well, having attended this department. But I think the fact that the students have the opportunity to get additional scholarship money, this will allow us to actually double the scholarships that we offer the department, which is a fantastic thing, and allows us to tailor scholarships to certain groups and types of students that we haven't in the past. So we're thrilled, and our students are going to benefit tremendously from it. We couldn't be happier.

LaKesha Anderson:

The Department of Communication at St. Cloud will be renamed the Judy C, Pearson Department of Communication. Judy, what does this distinction mean to you?

Judy Pearson:

Most of us have some wish for immortality. People in academia write books and articles. People in art create paintings and sculpture. Businesspeople build buildings or business empires. And so one of the things that we can do in academic circles is have departments or institutions carry our names. It's a small but a significant way of being remembered, really. And I'm hoping the name will inspire other students who've come to think about. Many of us in Minnesota in my generation had a template by which to live our lives. We went to high school, college and graduate school. Then we launched into careers that spanned the remainder of our lives. I wish that we could add another period of the end of that time, a period of philanthropy. Without thinking twice, we would retire and then devise methods of sharing what we earned with other people.

LaKesha Anderson:

Jeff and Judy, as we wrap up our conversation today, could you speak a bit about how communication education matters in a changing world?

Jeffrey Ringer:

Well, I always tell my students that communication skills are crucial in the workplace. And I often tell stories about employers who say when they hire students, that they hire them for some content knowledge that they have, but they can't share that content knowledge with others. They're only worth 50% of their value to him or her as an employer. So communication skills have always been

important. But just recently, just this last week, we noticed a job announcement here in Minnesota. The Minnesota League of Cities is hiring for a position that will work to develop relationships between the organization and member cities. And part of those relationships are helping those cities deal with some of the contemporary issues that they're facing, the difficult subjects that they're experiencing, the public dialogs that are needed and so forth. So it's a good example of a position that is just perfect for communication studies and shows how the world is evolving. And so there are new needs for communication. The needs for communication aren't taking a backseat, but they just evolve and they grow. So this job description is looking for someone who is a mediator, a facilitator, someone who can facilitate dialog and so forth. Those are exactly what we teach in a contemporary department of communication studies. So as things change, communication skills remain relevant, if not grow more important.

Judy Pearson:

Communication has never been more important. Adding to what Jeff just commented on, which is very important, our country and our world are facing problems that have rarely been more grave than they are today. We see conflict erupting in other countries, and our own political, medical, and educational leaders are searching for better ways to inform and persuade. And as the world continues to shrink, these needs will only increase. I would just say, as a way of concluding, communication is ubiquitous and consequential. That's important. Communication is ubiquitous and consequential.

LaKesha Anderson:

Thank you, Judy and Jeff, for joining us today to discuss Judy's generous gift to St. Cloud. I look forward to hearing more about St. Cloud's Judy C. Pearson Department of Communications Studies in the future.

Judy Pearson:

Thank you.

Jeffrey Ringer:

Thank you.

Conclusion:

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, established theory, and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities, and in our world.

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 of scholars 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.

Communication Matters, organized at the association's national office in downtown Washington, DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with content development support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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