



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

Episode 16: Book Highlight: *Major Decisions: College, Career, and the Case for the Humanities*

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Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles

E. Michele Ramsey

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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 E. Michele Ramsey. Dr. Ramsey has co-authored the new book, *Major Decisions: College, Career, and the Case for the Humanities*. *Major Decisions* argues that the humanities equip today's students with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in their careers and also prepares them to think about the big questions facing our world and our democracy. So, in this episode we'll be discussing and the case for the humanities in today's high-tech world. First, a bit more about Dr. Ramsey. Dr. Ramsey is the associate professor of communication, arts and sciences and women's studies at Penn State University at Berks. Dr. Ramsey researches representations of gender in the media, women's rights rhetoric, social movement rhetoric and political rhetoric and has authored numerous academic journal articles on these topics. Hello and welcome to *Communication Matters*, Michele.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Thank you. Thanks for having me and it's great to be here talking about this stuff with you guys.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

We've talked a lot on this podcast about the humanities. We've had some interviews with our partners at The National Humanities Alliance, we've had discussions with the folks who produce humanities indicators and the president of ACLS was one of our guests. And so, we spend a lot of time talking about the humanities and we've always sort of assumed what the humanities are. I'm hopeful that you might explain what you all mean by the humanities from your particular perspective and in terms of the book that you've authored.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Yeah. I think one of the things that we've had to deal with in the book is that you have the liberal arts and then you have the humanities, right? And so, the liberal arts started with grammar and logic and rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. But then at the end of the 1900s, the beginning of this century, we sort of divorced liberal arts and some moved into STEM and social sciences went in that direction and the rest of us just kind of got put into the humanities. And so, there are technical definitions of the humanities. The NEH has a list that's not inclusive but language, modern classical language, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, comparative religion, ethics, all that good stuff. We add some additional categories that again aren't entirely inclusive like American studies, area and region studies, communication studies—our discipline—ethnic, gender, women's and cultural studies and then interdisciplinary studies like Holocaust studies, Renaissance studies, the classics, things like that.

And so, what we see a lot of times is the humanities and the liberal arts get conflated and they get used as synonyms sometimes because of the split that's recently happened. So, when we were working on the book, we made sure to the extent that we could without calling Mark Cuban and asking him personally when you meant liberal arts, did you really mean humanities. And so, we would dig into the context of the conversations and make sure that anytime someone was talking about the liberal arts and we reading that as them really talking about the humanities, we could make a pretty good case that that's what was happening. So, that's how we define it in the book pretty traditionally but then also make that distinction between the liberal arts and the humanities and point out that sometimes when you hear people talking about the liberal arts, they really are talking about the humanities.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right. That's great. And the clarity with which you've divided your book is I think very useful to the reader and would be useful to our listeners. You've split everything up into four parts and over those parts, you make different cases for the value of the humanities and part one focuses on the economy. So, we sometimes imagine that today's economy sort of made up entirely and we hear this a lot I think in the mainstream media and that sort of thing of high-tech science and



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math-related jobs and the sort of STEM push. And you argue that this ignores the knowledge and the creative economies which I think is great that you argue that. But what do these terms mean and how do they relate to the humanities in particular?

E. Michele Ramsey:

Okay. Yeah. So, bear with me because this stuff is really complex and we were not economics majors in school. And I have to give credit to my co-author Laurie Grobman who worked very hard to do the research and the thinking and analyzing information to come up with the chapter on the different parts of the economy and the connection of the humanities. When we started the book, I unfortunately came down with a really terrible case of shingles.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Oh my!

E. Michele Ramsey:

Oh, it was terrible. And she had to do this work on her own and it was really hard work. So, I couldn't help at that time and I just want to give her a shout out for doing that difficult thinking. But to answer your question, and again bear with me, it's complex and a bit little long, the knowledge economy is the collection, processing and distribution of information in a wide range of business and industries and rather than producing material goods which is what former economies have tended to do, the knowledge economy produces and distributes information. So, in short, the knowledge economy relies on intellectual capabilities rather than physical capabilities or natural resources. It's present in all sectors of the economy even in manufacturing. So, if you think about even car manufacturing, when you look at the economy and its relationship to that manufacturing, a lot of the value added in cars now is not really about the car itself. It's about the creativity, the design efficiency.

I know we joke about it a lot but the cup holders, things that think about human relationships to their automobiles and also goodwill and companies like Subaru being able to create a brand that has a following based on corporate philosophy in large part. Innovative marketing and sales techniques, all of these things are part of the knowledge economy and they have become as important if not more important than actually fabricating those cars. And so, when we think about what the global economy holds for graduates in the next four or ten or even 20 years, we can't just think about who's creating those elements, the things, the programs, the logistics, the tools. We also have to think about who's going to make that new thing, the most popular new thing with a great social media campaign, who's going to sell that program to an industry so that they change the way that they do business and convince that that's the right move for their business, who's going to explain to the general public and consumers what this great new



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product can do and how it can make their lives better. These jobs are all part of the knowledge economy and they are jobs that humanities graduates are already excelling in.

The second part of that question is about the creative economy and you can think about the creative economy in two different ways. What used to be sort of central to corporations, price, quality, the left-brain, digitized, analytical work that is associated traditionally with knowledge is being outsourced in a lot of cases to other countries. And so, one of the core competencies that's really starting to emerge is creativity. That right-brain stuff that smart companies are now learning to harness and learning to harness it so that they can generate more growth through their organizations. And that's game changing. It's not just about math and science anymore. It's about creativity, imagination and above all, innovation and changing and making things better. Fareed Zakaria offers an example in his book *In Defense of the Liberal Arts* and he talks about sneakers, tennis shoes where I come from. So, you can have a tennis shoe or a sneaker made anywhere in the world. In fact, that's where most of them are made, not in the United States. But what makes you able to sell that tennis shoe for \$300 is the story, right? The branding and the kind of marketing that you do and that's about creativity and innovation. You can also think about companies that create apps for our phones and we talk about a number of these in the book. They are starting to realize that they have to think about human nature, they have to think about freedom of speech, they have to think about privilege and power structures and structural inequalities and injustice. And one of the computer engineers that we talk about in the book laments that so many builders of technology like herself haven't spent much time thinking about technology and its impact on society.

And so, that's another part of the creative economy. How are we going to create things like apps that speak to what humans want and need? And then how technology creates divisions and gaps? In a more vigorous example, Amazon's Alexa, computer engineers, hardware/software folks created those little dots we have in our house but who decides what she responds to a question with and especially given that she's marked in this gender sex binary that's male and feminine, how is she going to answer them? So, how is she going to answer a question about the Me Too movement? How is she going to respond when someone calls her a bitch? How is she going to respond to someone saying that they've been sexually assaulted? These are all questions that people in the room have to make decisions about and those questions require creative thinking and historical, political, economic and social knowledge of deep traditions and challenges to those traditions in our culture. And those are some of the ways that humanities students can influence innovation in the creative economy.

The second thing to think about in terms of the creative economy is creative industries and those are things you're probably more familiar with: television, advertising, architecture, arts and



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crafts, music, publishing, research and development, software, computer games, sports, all of that good stuff. These industries add social and cultural value to our lives and even in really lean economic times, we can see right now, they still maintain their value. I mean think about what most of us have talked about doing during all of this quarantine time. We joke about almost getting to the end of Netflix. And so, these things matter and they add a lot to our lives and they are relatively stable when things get tough in the economy. And so, that creative economy is really lucrative and it's here to stay. And even when technology changes whether we're talking about going to Blockbuster and getting a VHS tape or streaming off of Netflix, the kinds of things that you still need done don't really change. The marketing and the telling of good stories and humanities students can do those jobs. They can create content that engages audience and they can create campaigns that encourage audience engagement and they're doing that already. And so, all of these creative industries that I mentioned are full of jobs for humanities majors who want to teach or market or edit, work in PR, program. George Anders calls them jobs that are "indirectly catching the warmth of the tech revolution". And there are plenty of those jobs for humanities major. And so, that creative and knowledge economy stuff I think is really important for us to be able to communicate.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

You also addressed the broader perception that humanities majors despite all those jobs being available are underemployed or unemployed. Could you talk about what the data actually says about this income gap or the lack thereof that income gap and how it applies to humanities undergraduates and other graduates, STEM graduates?

E. Michele Ramsey:

So, a 2015 study from The Georgetown Center on education in the workforce found that at the beginning of the recovery from the 2008 great recession so the years 2011 to 2012, humanities graduates had an unemployment rate only 1.9% higher than engineer majors, only 1.4% higher than business majors and it was even closer to majors in computers, math and biology. And the same organization also gave us some great earnings data and they looked at earnings directly out of college and in peak earning years. And the median income earnings for new college graduates with a baccalaureate degree in the humanities were actually slightly higher than students who have physical or natural sciences or mathematics degrees and only slightly lower than people with baccalaureates in professional or pre-professional fields. And when you fast forward to those peak earning years, it's true that sometimes humanities students tend to start out earning a little less than graduates in other fields but those numbers tend to even out with time and/or additional education. And so, actually the median annual earnings for those between 56 and 60 with a baccalaureate degree in the humanities is about \$2,000 higher than people that have a professional or pre-professional field degree. And in 2018 the salary survey



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from The National Association of Colleges and Employers offered even more good news for humanities students. The average salary was \$56,688 coming out of college which was almost equal to students graduating with business degrees.

One other thing I think is really important to note when we talk about humanities salaries is that a lot—and I think you sort of communicated a little bit about this—a lot of that discussion is specially about humanities salaries in relation to STEM and STEM salaries. English professor Erin Handlin made an excellent point when he said that this rhetoric hits humanities degrees usually against the very highest paying engineering degrees so like petroleum engineers.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right, right. Aerospace engineering.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Right. And so, what that does is it tremendously inflates the value of a STEM degree and underrepresents the value of a humanities degree. And when you make only those comparisons, of course, STEM comes out looking great but when you think about all majors in STEM, you see that those differences in salary are actually much less stark. For example, 2016 data from The National Center for Education Statistics showed the unemployment rate of an English major to be about 3.4%. But unemployment for math majors was at 3.9, biology was at 3.5% and the aggregate unemployment percentage for all STEM majors was 3.3%. So, the unemployment for STEM majors was only about a tenth of a percent better than for English majors. And salary data tells us a similar story. The Georgetown Center for Education and Workforce said that English majors in 2015 earned \$53,000 a year and that's only \$1,000 less than a biology major or a history major. It's \$4,000 more than the average salary for a psychology major that year and \$5,000 more than a neuroscience major graduating that year. And so, the data is very clear. Humanities students whether they are talking about the beginning of their careers or in their peak earning years, they are doing just fine. They are not living in their parents' basements, they're not working in fast food, all those myths and jokes. It's just not the case by and large.

And I think it's also important to say that studies show that humanities students like their jobs. They report job satisfaction and being fulfilled and being happy with the work that they do at consistently just as high a level as any other major and I think that's really important. So, the good news for students majoring in the humanities or thinking about majoring in the humanities is that you can choose a career that makes you happy, that gives you a sense a purpose and it gives you a livable wage and these things are not mutually exclusive things when you're thinking about the humanities. And students have so many great choices for major. We argue



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that they deserve to be given correct and precise information about all those majors and their choices and salary data and workforce data and the data makes it clear that humanities major do quite well in comparison to most other degrees.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I know a lot of the learned societies that are rooted in the humanities or that are reflective of different humanities disciplines are very concerned about the fact that communicating that data is really critical to overcoming this sort of broad mythological popular perception, the barista English major or the philosopher who's in his parents' basement or her parents' basement. So, I think that's really important and I know a lot of my colleagues are very concerned about that and how to communicate it which is the big part. The second part of your book takes it a little bit outside of the data realm and into a broader consideration of the overall value of the humanities, the enduring value of humanities and humanities research. This is such a critical question I think and you argue that the humanities help us address really big questions about life, about our communities, about our democracy. What do you mean by these big questions? What are some of the big questions?

E. Michele Ramsey:

Yeah, yeah. It's an important thing for people to understand. The humanities, they address an individual's life and big questions. How do you live a good life? What's the meaning of life? These questions are about personal enrichment and that's valuable in and of itself, right? To know ourselves and to know what we stand for or what we want in the world and what it means to be a human walking the Earth. But the humanities also attend to questions of a common good from upholding democratic values, thinking about equality and justice, making better decisions on urgent issues before us right now and for the future, understanding history, political and economic context of the past and present, that's where the humanities really contribute to those big questions. Thousands of thinkers and writers and artists have explored these enduring questions. What does it mean to be human? What is evil? What is worth dying for? What does it mean to be free? What is happiness? What is success? What does it mean to live a good life? Why are we here? A big one for our discipline, what is truth? What is love? Can war be just? Does truth even exist? What is justice? What are human rights? Do we have free will? Are humans inherently good?

So, there are lots of other enduring questions that our students engage with and those questions ask them to engage their intellect, their sense of beauty, their sense of truth, their sense of morality and these questions are layered with other big questions. And so, when we talk about these things in humanities classes, we are fostering deep thinking, we are requiring thoughtful and contemplative reflection and we are asking questions that resist easy answers



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and that's the hard stuff in my opinion. The humanities invite and demand critical judgment that's informed by context and history, ethics, diversity, difference and an understanding of how power operates in society and to whose benefit. Citizens and certainly employees too who can think in complex and multi-layered and critical ways can be very, very important in helping us solve what have been called wicked problems that we face in the country and in the world. Wicked problems are complex problems that resist easy solutions because the changing context always changes the problem and humanity is also constantly changing the problem. It's a big part of that context. We've seen that recently with COVID-19 and the politicization of wearing masks, something that science tells us with near certainty is going to help us stop this and stop the spiraling tragedy of death and illness and economic decline. And yet, here we are, with people refusing to wear these things.

So, science can give us answers but humans process these answers and how they process these answers plays a big role in the extent to which scientific information can solve a problem. And so, to what extent have folks sending these messages out about masks looked into history and seen how this discourse has played out in history? I know that there's some look in social sciences in terms of adolescent behaviors as we talk about going back into the campus. But that's where the humanities is really, really important in solving some of our wicked problems to the best of our ability. And so, so very few problems exist without humanity as part of the problem. So, solutions that are about science or technology have to be smart and consider the knowledge that humanities students can bring to the table. And more and more, we're starting to see that and see public communication, offices and scientific places, medical humanity degrees and health communication degrees, people starting to realize that we play a really big, important role in some of these enduring problems and questions.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I think most Americans would, if polling is to be believed, conclude that our democratic culture is at a really perilous point right now. You and I both study political rhetoric and I think we might agree that it is beyond and not just about Donald Trump but that there are larger, bigger questions at work. How do you see the humanities working specifically about that particular wicked problem, about making our democratic culture work?

E. Michele Ramsey:

I would say that the humanities offer a few things. First of all, they can teach us empathy. So, the humanities play an important role in crafting the common good, like I've said before, in a functioning democracy. And the humanities expose students to people and cultures with whom they might never otherwise interact and this ability to imagine what other people are thinking or feeling or experiencing means that the humanities can foster empathy. And that is so incredibly



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important for understanding and understanding each other is so important for coming up with solutions together in a democracy. We also encourage oppositional thinking much to my parents' chagrin as they had to go with a humanities student in the house. Humanities fosters that oppositional thinking that's necessary for a vibrant democracy. We promote free thinking, we promote challenges to receive wisdom and the production of new and hopefully better ideas by challenging what we've always thought to be true.

I think the humanities also encourage students and ourselves to assess ourselves. The humanities ask us to look critically at ourselves and to do better by other people. Recent debates about Confederate monuments and flags show us that it is often very difficult and uncomfortable to learn about humanity's history of inhumanity and we have got to learn what humans in history have done to other humans in the name of political philosophy or religion, medicine, economics and so on. It's painful to look at. Even more difficult is the fact that we have to learn about our own unexamined traditions and tendencies that negatively impact people in our neighborhoods. And humanities students are used to engaging in these very difficult discussions and deliberations on these very kinds of topics and that kind of discussion and the ability to do that discussion well is essential for change.

And then that gets us to civil discussion and dialogue and debate which are sorely lacking right now. Humanities faculty do tend to teach students how to deliberate together in constructive and respectful conversations that are required for democracy to be able to thrive. We talk about uncomfortable topics like politics and religion and racism and sometimes these conversations are difficult. They are definitely not fun, they can be challenging for students, they can be equally challenging for faculty. They require a good deal of emotional and intellectual energy and they can challenge some of our most fundamental beliefs about ourselves and our world. But they are entirely necessary and these conversations are central to our humanity and how we can be able to better understand and exist and work with each other. We definitely need citizens who can create persuasive arguments that are well-supported and clearly communicated. And I think about the tragedy of the 2018 shootings in in Parkland, Florida and the high school there and agree with them or not, many of the students who survived that shooting immediately engaged the world in really deft persuasive arguments in favor of gun control on the airways and in social media, right?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Absolutely.



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E. Michele Ramsey:

They created a message, they crafted a strategy, they created the National March for Our Lives on March 24th in 2018 and I think the world was really surprised and impressed and stunned by their eloquence, their ability to use evidence and the effective arguments of these young people. But when we found out that this particular school district requires most students to take debate courses, those of us in communication were like well, of course. Of course, they did an excellent job of doing this sort of thing. So, this story is just one really good example of how one discipline in the humanities, ours, makes really big change in our democracy. And so, we have got to challenge the notion that humanities are frivolous or worse, unnecessary because there's not some immediate tangible product that you can sell and thinking long and hard about the questions that the humanities pose is not a privilege. It is a requirement that if we want to live our best lives and live together in a better world and participate in innovative economies, we have to think about some really important questions and how we're going to engage people in those answers. And I think we need to take seriously the claims that the political assault on the humanities and its disciplines may be about the ability of our disciplines to foster critical thinking and to disrupt group think. I think those are fair questions. And so, many challenge the humanities, they muddy our reputation, they even attempt to shut us down and shut our departments and our disciplines and that tells me we're doing something really important for democracy because we are getting a lot of pushback. And so, I think that just the fact that we have so many pushing back against us who are in positions of power tells us we're probably doing something right.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Beyond that and perhaps more specifically in the third part of the book, you go from the big ideas and saving of democratic culture down to the sorts of skills that the humanities student will graduate college with. And one of the things that learning outcomes encourages us to do is to think about what our students think, know and are able to do at the conclusion of their program of study. And so, you talk about writing and verbal communication skills and the like. What are the top three say skills that humanities students emerge from their programs with? And why are those particularly valuable to employers?

E. Michele Ramsey:

This part of the research got a little complex because the answers change a little bit every year. Every study calls the same things different things. We can't seem to agree on things like that. But we were able to discern what the consistently regular list of top skills and knowledge are. Top of the list are written communication, oral communication and collaboration ability and I want to say before I start talking about those things that we call these core skills and knowledge in the book. We want to shove away the soft skills language for two reasons. First of all, soft is



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not a good word if you're trying to project strength and it's also just not true. When all of the skills that we talk about are part and parcel to the humanities and the education you get in humanities degrees, there's nothing soft about them. They're absolutely core skills and knowledge. And the second reason we want to move away from that soft skills language is because it continues that hard skill/soft skill, STEM/humanities binary which people think is useful for anybody or for solving problems. So, we call them core skills and knowledge and not soft skills.

But the first one we talk about is written communication. Written communication and oral communication tend to be number one. They shift from one to two generally but humanities students write a lot and it's a good thing because employers want students who can write. Even employers in engineering and technology demand writing skills. You might remember the book *Academically Adrift* came out in 2011 and it caused a real splash. It noted in its findings that at least 45% of students in their study showed no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning or writing skills. But humanities students in their study actually did show improvement in those skills and they talk about that as a result of the writing and the reading that humanities students consistently engage in in their classes. In his book, *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a Useless Liberal Arts Degree*, George Anders cites Liz Kirchner who is head of talent acquisition at a Chicago investment firm. She emphasizes how important it is to know how to write when you leave school and she said it's easier to hire people who can write and teach them how to read financial statements rather than hire accountants in hope of teaching them to be strong writers. And friends that I have who are partners in accounting firms and working in business constantly lament the same sort of thing that they aren't getting students who can communicate effectively in written and oral communication with clients. And so, that written communication part is really important. Students in the humanities do research papers and presentations and poems and argumentative essays and other kinds of genres of writing but they also read a lot of good writing which helps them become better writers. And so, writing is one of those top skills.

The second one, oral communication. Of course, the majority of the communication we have in the workplace is probably oral and not written. And so, so much of good business practice is about good solid oral communication skill in a variety of context, right? So, 2015 report from Burning Glass Technologies noted that oral communication is recognized as one of the skills though with the largest gap between what employers want and what college students have when they graduate from college and studies also point to the cost of ineffective communication. And the data on that is incredibly clear but I don't think that hiring managers or even the general public understands just how important it is for effective businesses. So, in 2009, Watson Wyatt reported that companies with highly effective communication practice had 47% total higher



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return to shareholders over a five-year period than those that had less effective communication. A 2011 study of 400 companies in the United States and the United Kingdom with over a hundred thousand employees found that employee misunderstandings cost about \$37 billion a year which averaged about \$62.4 million per year per company which is staggering. And then in its own research, Best Buy found that for every 0.1% of increased employment engagement, they saw more than \$100,000 increase in store annual operating income.

In terms of how important it is for career advancement, a 2017 working paper from The National Bureau of Economic Research noted that while the shares of tasks requiring social skills—they call it social skills; they're really talking about communication skills—grew 24% from 1980 to 2012. And The National Longitudinal Study of Youth found a correlation between higher social skills or communication skills and earning more money even after they controlled for education, standardized test scores and job type. So, you are really going to do better in whatever job you have if you have effective communication skills. So, whether we're talking about one's role in a larger economy or one's role in an organization or a department, a work team, effective public and interpersonal communication are absolutely key to success.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And I think there are numerous employer surveys that showed just that to be the case. That's interesting.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Exactly. It's always up at the top. The last one that's always up at the top is the ability to collaborate, what we call—

Trevor Parry-Giles:

A communication skill.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Right. Yeah. Group communications, small group communication, organizational communication, right? Those are the classes we teach. A 2016 study showed that time spent between managers and employees in collaborative work has increased 50% from 1996 to 2016 and good collaborative work necessitates ethical people putting the project above themselves and understanding and being able to work with people that come from different cultures and different backgrounds. We know from research that more diverse teams tend to come up with better solutions and more diverse organizations tend to have higher levels of income. And so, we know diversity matters and it's good for business. But you have to be able to work with people that are different than yourself. And so, it's one thing to create a team of really smart



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people but it's another to have that team work effectively as smart people to solve a problem and that work effectively part is what the humanities can help with.

The rise in the knowledge and creative economies that we talked about earlier means that groups are often working together to create knowledge, creativity and innovation to add value to things that already exist. So, a tech company doesn't just need engineers to build software and hardware. They have to have marketers and sales people and lawyers and creative directors to keep that company thriving. And so, building the latest app is going to require collaboration between a host of different people with different backgrounds who think and who work differently but who have to work together to keep a company competitive. And one of the stories we talk about in the book is a man that works for an app company and he said it takes about ten meetings to get to the end of an app creation and only two of those meetings are about the tech. The rest are all about how we're going to all work together to get this to happen. And so, even in science and technology, you have got to have the skills that the humanities can teach.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

One might argue especially in science and technology.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Yeah. Right. You're right. Back up. Yeah, you're right. So, the other thing I think is important is that teaching students how to collaborate doesn't just happen because faculty make people do teamwork. We all know how much we love group work. But humanities faculty—and I'm not saying this doesn't happen in other disciplines but I know it happens in the humanities—we help students learn how to work as team members. We help teach them how to engage the process of collaboration, not just worry about coming up with an end result or an answer. So, we give students in the humanities an opportunity to build interpersonal skills, negotiation skills, critical thinking skills, metacognition skills, listening skills and other skills that are vital to collaboration as well as an appreciation of diversity and different perspectives on diverse teams and I think that's something that the humanities adds more often than probably other folks. These three skill sets are all linked to communication but we are also linked to all the other core skills and knowledge that we talk about in the book and that makes it a great selling point for communication majors especially but it's a great selling point for all humanities majors I think.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Going meta I guess is something that you do in the fourth part of the book where you sort of discuss how it is these humanities students can tell their story, how they can sell themselves, how they can personally brand themselves as humanities majors. What can we do I guess as



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educators to help these students prepare their humanity story? What are the most important components for them to relate, that sort of thing?

E. Michele Ramsey:

Yeah. So, I mean the job market our students are entering now is very different. It's not about how can you do the job. It's how can you stand out from the other 200 people that can do the job. And so, that's where this branding stuff comes from and we know that talking about branding and students ruffles some people's feathers but it's just a fact of life. Students have to go out and get jobs and we have to help them do that. And that doesn't take anything away from all of the high sorts of honorable things that we do in the humanities but there is this practical part that we need to I think about a little more often.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

On a side note, that's one of the things I really appreciate about your book. You recognize that there's this dual track that we all face as educators that really need to talk about the big ideas and saving democracy. But our students are coming at us and they need a job and I appreciate that. I just wanted to say that.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Yeah, definitely. Thanks. Humanities students tend to be misunderstood or even ignored because employers don't really know what we do or why it matters and that's why we wrote the book so that students and parents and faculty and staff and admin can have the language and the arguments and the data to tell people why it matters. But one of the great things about the humanities is that we're really good at storytelling. And so, that's what students get some practice at in the humanities and that's what they need to do and we can teach them to tell these stories once they get into the job market. We need students to be able to tell their humanities stories, to talk about their degree and to be boldly proud of their humanities education. Employers want to hear about what makes them different and compelling, why they want to do what they want to do, what their passions are and what's their vision for themselves and their careers. And I think a lot of those answers come from the things that they are most attracted to in the humanities. For prospective and current students, developing that story has to begin immediately. Students have to start thinking about curricular choices, extracurricular choices, work, volunteer experiences and try to make sure that those choices can help them apply and hone the core skills and knowledge that employers want to see from graduates.

And once they're ready to enter the job market, they need to package and communicate these stories and that's where that personal branding part comes in. Seniors have got to be able to effectively and importantly and it's super hard for me to succinctly communicate the value of



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their humanities majors as it relates to whatever job that they're seeking. And so, they need to refer back to the excellent humanities education that trained them in the very core skills and knowledge that employers want that are needed for that specific job. They need to offer clear examples of how they've learned what they've learned and how they are going to apply those skills and knowledge to that particular job. They need to think about how they're going to talk about their experiences on a sports team or as a representative in student government or as a volunteer or as a part-time cashier or ship manager, how can they connect all of these things to their education to show that they've applied these things before they're entering the job market.

And so, another part of creating these windows to who they are maybe not necessarily needs to be communicated to employers but I think that there are some questions students need to think about. How did they get here? What are the relationships and experiences in life that led them to the major that they have and to the career choice that they've chosen? What's the niche market that they want to pursue? What problems might someone already have in this market that they have a solution for, they can help solve? What are their key goals and their talents as a graduate? How have they already honed their skills that employers are going to be most interested in? What makes them compelling? How are they going to get that message out there? Are they going to use blogs or websites or social media? They need to think about how their prospective employers are going to look them up on Google. What are they going to find and how can they use that to help strengthen their candidacy? That brand has to be multi-dimensional but also succinct and that's really, really hard. And so, it's going to take thought and it's going to take time and it's going to take a lot of edits. But the process will help them understand themselves better and then it'll help them I think explain their humanity story an effective way.

And I always tell my students some of my stories. So, I talk about my Aunt Kay who when I was about eight took me to the grocery store outside of Austin, Texas and I got in the car and I said I don't understand why we have to pay for this stuff. I don't understand why we can go and get everything we need but other people can't. Why can't they just give bread to people who need bread? And she said Michele, that's called socialism and she told an eight-year-old what the difference between these ideas were and why those differences mattered. That stuck with me. I didn't know it at the time but it stuck with me. My mom is someone who as a single mother worked very hard in our formative years, who has always, always taught us to stand up and to speak truth to power and that's a huge part of who I am. My grandmother was a debate champion and graduated right before the depression, '28, '29 and was offered a scholarship to Baylor as a debater and couldn't take it because her parents didn't have the money for the other things that she would need. It actually ended up being the scholarship that Governor Ann Richards took at one point. So, I didn't know that my grandmother was a debater but I surely



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saw a lot of that in her in our conversations throughout my life and her progressiveness and her interest in social equality and injustice. And so, I tell students I think about all that stuff and I can tell people why what I do matters because I can think about how these people impacted me. And so, I think that our personal lives and how we got to our majors is a really important part of that story that students have to think about.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I also like that because it speaks to students taking pride in how they got to their major. I worry sometimes that students don't recognize—and this is what I think is a remarkable contribution of your book—don't recognize how proud they should be that they've chosen and that they've gotten to the point to be a humanities major.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Right. I mean my husband's an academic advisor and I mean I know he hears more than he wants to I'm in this major because I can make money, I'm in this major because my parents said this is what I have to major in. A lot of our students are doing these majors in spite of everyone around them telling them it's not a great idea and that's something to be proud of too.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm totally with you. And I think in many ways that it's a great place to wrap up because I think one of the things that we like to do on the pod is think about how communication matters in all of this and just how important communication is for anybody in the humanities and telling that story is really important. So, thank you, Michele, for joining me today and talking about your new book. Listeners, I hope you'll grab a copy or find a copy and look through what Michele Ramsey and her co-author Laurie Grobman have said about major decisions and helping students achieve their best potential as humanities majors. So, thank you, Michele, very much.

E. Michele Ramsey:

Thank you for having me and letting me talk about these things with you. I really appreciate it.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Great. NCA has always believed in the humanities and we hope our listeners as a result of this conversation and all of the others where we've talked about the humanities have a renewed appreciation of their value in our lives and in our world. So, thank you, listeners, for joining us again on this episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

In NCA news, NCA seeks members to serve on a variety of governance bodies and committees such as the Legislative Assembly, Convention Committee and The Committee on International



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Discussion and Debate. Unless otherwise indicated in a specific call, nominations are reviewed by the NCA Leadership Development Committee and self-nominations are absolutely welcome. All nominees must be current NCA members. Visit The Leadership Development Committee call page at natcom.org/leadership-development-call, natcom.org/leadership-development-call for more information about the available positions and the entire nomination process. The deadline to submit materials is September 1st, 2020.

Also, in NCA news, NCA is now accepting applications for grants to support communication research or other activities that advance the field of communication. Applications are due Thursday, October 1st, 2020 for NCA's Advancing the Discipline grants, grants funded by the Dale Leathers Fund to promote communication studies in emerging democracies and the new Research Cultivation grants. You can find out more about grants and opportunities to serve the discipline on the NCA website at natcom.org/NCA-grant-opportunities. That's NCA's website at natcom.org/NCA-grant-opportunities.

And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters* on August 20th. The episode commemorates the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which granted white women the right to vote. Four guests: Professor Dianne Bystrom, Professor Kristan Poirot, Professor Belinda Stillion Southard and Ella Stillion Southard will offer their perspectives on this amendment and on women's issues today. Tune in for this timely look at the history and the future of women's political activism in the United States.

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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