

Best Practices: A Young Professor's Reflections on Higher Education and Democracy for a World Beyond Our Borders

Interview with Dr. Khristina Haddad at Moravian College

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Abstract

Dr. Khristina Haddad is an assistant professor who has finished her fourth year in the Department of Political Science at Moravian College. Her teaching philosophy and practice are highlighted in our “Best Practices” feature in this issue of the *Journal of College and Character*. See <http://collegevalues.org/pdfs/Haddad.pdf>

Having completed her Abitur in Stuttgart, Germany, she fell in love with political theory and the liberal arts at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and continued her political theory studies at McGill University in Montréal, Canada. Dr. Haddad has taught at the University of Latvia in Riga as an instructor for Civic Education Project. In 2003, she graduated from the Political Science doctoral program at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Her research addresses the political importance of how we think about time.

Crosby: *What do you think is the mission of higher education?*

Haddad: Higher education is central to the democratic project, and in times of crisis, to democratic hope. That said, I do not speak of democracy lightly or with easy contentment. Having grown up in what was then an overwhelmingly middle class West Germany, the extremes of class stand out to me in daily life in the United States, in particular in relationship to the privatization of vast parts of life and the depletion of public goods I enjoyed as a child and adolescent. As a result, I am continuously aware of the class stratification that shapes education and constrains access to it in this country at every turn. In the long run, I would like to see higher education more dedicated to understanding and intervening in what feels to me like the falling apart of the country into different universes, vastly different conditions of life, and inexplicably different values placed on one hour of work time. In a more immediate context, the most important mission of higher education in the United States is to make as many people as possible attentive to the world beyond our borders, the injustices within our borders and the remedies available or not within our system, and the truly astounding range of cultures, practices, and ideas that give form to what each of us is inclined to take for granted as a

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natural or normal existence. Such a complex project cannot be conveyed merely literally or directly. Higher education is also about expanding sensibilities, about being able to read the world beyond its literal representations. Meg Mott, a political theorist at Marlboro College whom I admire, asks her students to develop an aesthetic of justice, to investigate the beautiful and its implications in an infinite number of relationships. This is a pluralist approach that nonetheless discovers priorities. There is no higher learning without metaphor.

Crosby: *How do you define a good education?*

Haddad: Learning how to concentrate and to drive one's own thought process is the central practice of a good education. Good education teaches you about the constraints and possibilities of your mind in its current state and by doing so opens up future possibilities. In this sense, good education is by definition open-ended. Good education empowers the learner who has been thoroughly sensitized and competently introduced to the world and increasingly wants to take responsibility for it, whether that is in the shape of building solid bridges or ensuring social justice.

Crosby: *Should the university be responsible for student character development? Why or why not? If so, how?*

The question of a formal approach to character in higher education makes me uneasy unless it refers to the importance of exercising judgment and rigorously pursuing the unexamined content of one's own mind and of socially sanctioned speech. I am religious about political theory and I love the Socratic method. I like the radical and liberatory promises of the canon as well as those pivotal texts that haven't been enshrined. I teach bell hooks and Leo Strauss on education in the same course. Fierce intellectual engagement with the humanities and its questions is not at odds with the educational mission and requires no additional programming to engage that part of the self we care about when we speak of character. I have read the table of contents of expensive tomes of leadership literature and was surprised to find that they reproduced an introductory course in political theory. Some kind of disconnection has taken place.

Crosby: *What are the big questions that you think most young people ask during their college years and what important questions do they tend not to ask?*

Here's a question I hear all the time: "How long will it take?" Frequently heard variants of this question include: "How long will it take to write this paper?," "How long will the movie take?," "How long will it take me to complete the reading?," "How long will the lecture take?," "How long will it take to make a million dollars?," "How long will this invasion take?" One can see this as a practical and necessary question, but sometimes it is also a dangerous question that rushes past important intellectual, political, moral, or ethical questions. The obsession with expediency and the desire to get *through* things trouble me as they flatten out life and learning. I see crises of meaning in the senior year when graduation is certain and performance anxiety fades into the background long

enough for difficult life questions to bubble up to the surface. When this happens before graduation, students will have a learning community to help them come to terms with the implications of playing the game of speedy instrumentalism and the dilemmas of not playing it. I wish we could get past "How long will it take?" and move on to questions such as "Why should or shouldn't I do a particular thing?" or "What does my action mean?"

Crosby: *Why do you think students should be stimulated to think for themselves?*

Haddad: My childhood and adolescence in Cold War West Germany was full of reminders of the dangers of not exercising judgment. Independent thought and the courage of the civilian were lauded as the only true protections against the beginning of new horrors. But it's not enough to think for oneself. One must be capable of conflict. By this I mean that discourse requires energy and a certain level of tolerance for antagonism, not simply that people should be inclined to fight or to engage in violence. Confronting difficult issues takes energy and inner strength. I have confidence in student thinking. I worry more about what John Stuart Mill identifies as the social tyranny of the majority that hinders expression about matters that have been slumbering under the stifling blanket of common sense. Lazy relativism and fear of confrontation can easily lead to self-censorship and undermine independent thought.

Crosby: *Is it disruptive for some students to think for themselves, that is, to begin questioning ideas about the world, their lives, etc., that they have heretofore taken for granted? Why or why not? If so, why do you think it is still important (if you do)?*

As an educator, I expect an independent thinker not to follow all rules obediently, not always to be polite, and sometimes to shout when others think it appropriate to whisper. Unthinking obedience to the law has proved to be antithetical to a good society and dangerous to humanity. Some of my best students can also be the rudest. Sometimes deeper engagement takes the shape of anger and frustration. I am not saying that this is necessary or that I advocate people not trying their best to live on decent terms with others, but that I am keenly aware of the fact that what often passes as decency is in fact destructive to the individual mind and psyche as well as the possibility of sanity and ethics in a community. When people who have not had the language or power to be heard on a matter of great importance speak for the first time, they often scream. We need a higher level of patience for disruptions that signal root-shaking experiences of thought. Moreover, we need to be willing to be transformed by the profound learning experiences of our students. There must be room for consequences. We cannot, for example, foster leadership skills and then not expect serious challenges to the status quo. Indifference worries me much more than disruption does. The lesson of Plato's *Apology* is that we have more to fear from the status quo than from the disruptions of the truth seeker.

Crosby: *Who were teachers who inspired you to become a teacher and how/why?*

My father, Toufy Haddad, represents the humanity and daily energy of education for me. Without both of those qualities, education makes little sense to me. When I was a child, I had the sense that my father was happy as a teacher, that there was excitement in the school, and that all this made for a good life. I doubt I could have gone anywhere without this foundation, and it was certainly my father who picked me up during the lows of my doctoral program.

Another foundational teacher of mine is Wiltrud Lux, my high school religious studies teacher at the Königin-Charlotte-Gymnasium in Stuttgart. Wiltrud is the one who opened my eyes to hermeneutics and epistemology, to the historic relationship between church and state, and to the high stakes of how we remember the Holocaust. Here is a person who takes time to think and doesn't hurry to speak. When she speaks I hear nuances that move me to refine my own thoughts.

Crosby: *Should teachers model ethical principles? Why or why not? If so, how?*

Being ethical doesn't attach itself to the profession of educators, but to the condition of being human, of living in a situation of constant human interaction, which we navigate more or less successfully beyond pure self-interest. Perhaps teachers are in a position to be especially aware of that because they see so many lives and so many developments over time. Good teachers excel at shifting our perspective so we can see more. Often that means seeing the other person's side of the story or a particular discipline's way of capturing the world. Perhaps that is ethics in practice: see more, care about what you see, and take actions of consequence.

Crosby: *What advice do you have for beginning college teachers?*

Haddad: Don't overteach. Eat three meals a day, sleep well, stay connected to the people and pursuits that replenish you, and wear non-binding underwear. It is important to be comfortable psychologically, socially, and physically, and to come to class prepared to share time with others. I overestimated my need to prepare content in which I was already well-versed from graduate school and underestimated just how much I had to learn in order to realize the new freedom and responsibility of my position as an assistant professor.

Beginning college professors should seek out new mentors. Show people that you have much to learn from them. They will not necessarily assume that you do. You probably blew in with a storm of advance advertising and (apparent) confidence. Young faculty come in new and shiny and with the freshly sharpened edge of the research university. It's good to actively lean into creating relationships at a new institution and not to assume that the cultures of institutions are interchangeable. There are at least half a dozen senior faculty at Moravian College who have fed me with insight and support. They have nurtured me through the start in a new school, a new role, and a new town. They have edited my articles and advised me on buying a house.

I have also found it helpful to remain a student in a formal sense. Right now I have two teachers: a voice instructor and a Meridian Flexibility System expert (a health practice also known as resistance flexibility training.) These two women continuously remind me about the importance of knowledge, discipline, patience, and kindness in the learning process. Some weeks I have been so busy and so distracted that I am too tight in my throat to sing or too tired in my head to remember a simple sequence of vowels. And yet I go to my own courses and expect students to retain knowledge of several books of Plato's *Republic*. We are not machines, and yet I suspect that I have sometimes been too mechanical or strict in my application of discipline and in my raising of expectations. Being a student again has humanized my teaching.

Crosby: Should teachers work in service to the community or be public intellectuals for particular social causes? Why or why not? Give examples of how you have promoted particular social causes or have modeled to your students social advocacy by means of your writing, teaching, service work, etc., or have encouraged them to be social advocates.

Haddad: In the United States, higher education occupies so many intellectuals that some of them must be public or else one must wonder whether they have not been cloistered away in a fortress that insulates them from the world and the world from them. I would not like to think that higher education is a prison where you may know many things but never speak to the world about them. This is a particularly sensitive matter in Political Science. It is politically urgent that intellectuals develop and maintain a voice beyond campus. Especially for tenured faculty, the conditions of speech are excellent: they find themselves in a situation of freedom few others can imagine. They find themselves in a situation of thought and speech democracy arguably presupposes but does not guarantee: they have time to read, think, and discuss matters of importance on a regular basis.

My engagement in Bethlehem has taken place within the college community for the most part up to now. Concretely, I have been active to insure greater access for students in wheelchairs and to help in creating the best possible prevention of and response to sexual assault on campus. My most visible contribution to campus was the revival of the SAFE ZONE sticker in support of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) members of the college community. I don't own a car and am a member of the Bethlehem Bicycle cooperative and Coalition for Alternative Transportation. I've taught students how to ride a bicycle. The course described in my article foregrounds the importance of political action and gives students the opportunity to compose and perform a call to action.

Crosby: Where have you traveled and how have these travels influenced your teaching?

My parents left California in the early seventies and moved to Europe. I couldn't retrace every trip if I tried, but my childhood memories are full of climbing the stairs of castles, boarding ferries, asking for directions, drifting into bakeries to taste local specialties, and taking in views from high places. Throughout the teenage years my father took me around the world and everywhere we sat and spoke with hosts and fellow travelers. As a

teenager, I saw people going into a trance to pass the hot sweaty hours of travel on the Yangtze River, farmers working in the fertile mud along the Nile, and parents trying to give away their child in a Masai village. As a young person, I came to the United States, studied political theory in Canada, and taught in Latvia after independence. I can't remember all the trips I have been on, but the strangest trip I ever took was to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I spent seven years before completing my PhD and moving to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where I now teach political theory.

Travel and learning are inseparable for me. I encourage all of my students to study abroad if at all possible. I hope that studying abroad will become more and more financially accessible for as many students as possible. It is not enough to call for study abroad given the economic straits and the anticipated debt of many students.

But travel doesn't have to be about going away. I am designing an Introduction to College Life course for this fall that will have an itinerary rather than a syllabus. I'd like to share my experiences with students by turning their first semester in college into a voyage that introduces them to the surrounds of formal learning that are so important: the history of the eighteenth century Moravians who founded our town and college, the rusting buildings of Bethlehem Steel, a good café where one can sit and read or chat, the independent movie theater, the canal towpath that runs along the Lehigh River, a comforting diner where chatter and pancakes can provide temporary relief from existential anxieties, the enticing locked rooms of our campus, and perhaps also my home. I'd like to give students a college experience beyond the fragmentation of 70-minute classes and I hope that we will become a group that just enjoys seeking out new experiences together rather than ticking off requirements. Travel can make learning irresistible, travel can shed light on what we call home and what we consider normal, travel can show alternatives and provide experiences of scale. Travel is about using our senses to apprehend the new, i.e., about learning with our whole person. Most importantly, travel can buy you time to think by liberating you from seemingly inescapable routines.

Crosby: *How do you organize your time so that you can balance teaching, research, and leisure (and other pursuits)?*

Time is the great wealth of academics. We may not be rich but we have an aristocratic level of control over our time. Good scheduling makes all the difference. I have been greatly influenced by the work of Eviatar Zerubavel, a sociologist of time who has also written an excellent manual for writers entitled *The Clockwork Muse*, and by Julia Morgenstern, an organization expert, author of *Organizing from the Inside Out*. The greatest lesson Zerubavel taught me was to determine the optimal duration and time of day for high concentration work such as writing. It's almost worse to work too much than too little because you can lose the quality of your work and your well being. What is this precious learning that will not allow me to be well? Students will not be compelled by misery. After all, I want to show them that thinking can make life better. I schedule with health and quality of work in mind. In practice this means that I invest in good and often

extensive scheduling in order to avoid fragmentation, stress, unnecessary transportation, eating away from home, appointments on the weekend, and overexertion. I find that regular discipline makes creativity-driven and spirit-lifting exceptions possible.

Crosby: Why did you choose your particular field of study?

I had no choice in the matter. Political theory gave me a language that helped me make sense of everything I had learned before and all the plurality of growing up bilingually and multiculturally. Political theory immediately began to tie together so many odds and ends. It was an addictively illuminating experience that sometimes left me with the feeling that the floor had disappeared below me. During college I had physical thinking experiences that ranged from forgetting to breathe in discussion to nausea triggered by the force of insights about epistemology and something akin to a sugar high upon finding a good metaphor for a political phenomenon.
