Doug Sprei

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei. Today's episode features Dr. Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi, Professor of Economics at Winston-Salem State University. Dr. Madjd-Sadjadi has more than 30 years of economic consulting and teaching experience and was formerly the chief economist of the city and county of San Francisco. He's provided consulting services for various governments and businesses, ranging from small to medium-sized enterprises to Fortune 500 firms. His work has been cited in the congressional record. He's helped secure state approval for the I-74 corridor in Winston-Salem and led to the repeal of the Glass-Stegel Act. He's the author of half a dozen books, including three textbooks and over 60 academic articles and book chapters. This past year, Dr. Madjd-Sadjadi has been serving as the Lee Barnes Campus Debate Fellow and faculty leader for our College Debates and Discourse Alliance initiatives at Winston-Salem State University.

Doug Sprei:

And for that reason, we bring in also my ACTA colleague Kayla Johnston to this conversation as she serves as program manager for our CD&D Alliance initiatives across North Carolina. She's been leading our program's growth in the UNC system and was responsible for bringing Winston-Salem State University into our cohort. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Zagros, welcome to Higher Ed Now; Kayla, thank you for so graciously greeting and hosting me here in North Carolina. We're very blessed to have you living so close by and helping us really expand our college debates and discourse alliance program across North Carolina. I'm interested in having a three-way conversation here, and I wanted to start with Zagros to just get into a little bit of your background, what really sets you up to be working with us and bringing our program to Winston-Salem State University. Let's talk a little bit about how you see your own mission as an educator.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (02:15):

Well, thank you. I've always thought that it's very important that students learn how to critically think and express themselves and in this manner, they need to be able to understand that there isn't a mission in higher education to try to indoctrinate. We don't want to do that. What we instead want to do is, however, is we want to emphasize that there are well-reasoned and poorly reasoned arguments for everything. And my job, I think, is to try to convince students not to change their minds or make them think a certain way, but make them really be able to understand how to articulate their viewpoints in a well-reasoned fashion. They can back it up. They can express themselves civilly, they can understand the other side, can see the positives and negatives of everything. They understand that there is no perfect solutions and they understand that the costs and benefits of everything that they're proposing. And when you do that, then I think that you make better policy and you make better choices. You understand that there is always a trade-off. That's what economics, which is my discipline, emphasizes there's always a trade-off in everything that we do. And you need to know what those trade-offs are for you to be able to articulate exactly why it is that you want to go forward with a particular position and understand what the potential unintended consequences might be.

Doug Sprei (03:33):

So day-to-day in the classroom, without even talking about bringing a program like ours to campus, how do you go about inflecting that ethos into the atmosphere for your students?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (03:45):

Well, one of the things that you do is you have to make sure that they have a good solid grounding in whatever discipline that you have so that they know what you are speaking about, what the values are that are inculcated within it. So for example, I teach both business ethics and economics. And so in business ethics, I have to start with the foundations of what are the major ethical foundations that we have to make ethical decisions. So we have deontological ethics, we have consequentialist ethics, we have virtue ethics, and we need to then take those and utilize them in a proper way to be able to synthesize what our own belief systems are going to be. And I always refer to as a three-legged stool never stands except you have all three of them, but you're going to emphasize one or the other in your own way.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (04:37):

And I try to point out to them that if you take any perspective too far, you're going to have unintended consequences. I said, you do not want to have an at entire society run exclusively by economists. You do not want one that's entirely run by business ethicists. You do not one that's run entirely by biologists. You want one where you have a melting pot of all of these disciplines coming together to come to a common understanding and common see common ground, and allow you to move forward. And each of us has unique perspectives, unique backgrounds, and a unique ability to influence the conversation.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (05:16):

Some of the smartest people I've ever met are individuals who are not formally educated. And I'll be honest with you, some of the dumbest people I've ever met are people who have all these nice letters after her name. And when I say that, I'm referring to the point of whether or not they're willing to listen. Are they willing to engage? Are they willing to learn? If you are not willing to learn, then you stopped being educated. We're supposed to be turning out lifelong learners who are interested in going beyond just simply what's in the book beyond what's simply in school, and basically learning forever and not sitting there and thinking that whatever they have already learned is somehow set in stone. Because the fact is that our world's paradigms are changing and the needs are changing, and that means we must change with it.

Doug Sprei (06:08):

Well somehow, and I don't remember what the sequence is, but Kayla and I or our program somehow sniffed you out. We found you. And because everything that you just talked about is the ground bed for embracing a program like ours and the kinds of things we're trying to do on campuses, which is really focused on experience for students, experiential stuff for students, immersing them in conversations where they're put on the spot to actually engage with others with different viewpoints and deliberately do that. We're just really glad we found you. So let's talk about a little bit about why you felt it would be worth working with the CD and D Alliance.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (06:47):

Okay, well, you probably found me through the Martin Center

Doug Sprei (06:51):

Because you were recommended by Jenna Robinson at the Martin Center. It all comes back to me.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (06:55):

Yeah, because I've worked a lot with them. I also worked with IHS Main Studies. That's where I started out on this journey of trying to put together a lot of the things that we can talk about later with respect to free speech and dialogue. But I also have a background going back since I was in high school, I mean I was a debater for Rotary International for the Optimist Society. I won several speech contests going back to even elementary school. I was part of Junior Statesman of America. I in fact ran from the floor for the presidency of the junior States of America's California branch because I found out that the person who was running was unopposed and I didn't like that. So I decided I would run and I ended up getting 47% of the vote from the floor, the floor of the conference.

Doug Sprei (07:49):

So you've got a real proclivity for all this.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (07:52):

And so I've always felt this At age 18, I ran for city council. I was a member of the state executive committee of the Libertarian Party of California. And so I've always had these basic beliefs that we need to have a really open society. It's important to me and I want people to be able to feel that they can enunciate whatever their viewpoints are.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (08:17):

And so that's kind of been my mission all along from the very beginning. In fact, when I went to Canada, when I was on study abroad for a year, I went and I joined their youth parliament, the McGill University Youth Parliament, and I was made the Minister of Employment and Immigration, which was always funny because they said there's the American who's going to be in charge of our immigration policies. And I took to things like political science and economics and history with a passion. Those were the areas that I really found interesting. And I always not only gravitate to it, but I've written a number of papers and works over the years. If you go back and look at it, I've helped bring about the repeal of Glass Stegel Act. The Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999 came in part because I wrote one of five papers sponsored by the Bankers Roundtable, arguing that that the banks were overpaying for their safety net. I wrote also a paper that helped get the drug courts instituted in California because I pointed out how expensive it was for the war on drugs in California. So in some ways I've been a friend theoretically to both so-called left wing and right rightwing policymakers probably because I've always choose freedom for,

Doug Sprei (09:36):

And I hear some great debate topics in some of the things that he just talked about. There's some great examples there that might drill into. But I'm curious as as you came into your role as an educator and students here at this institution and a lot of the others we work with, they're not naturally gifted orators necessarily. They're not really comfortable public speaking, and they're also documented to be inclined to self-censor their political and social viewpoints. So there's a lot of reluctance to express themselves freely and we're trying to coax them to do that. Tell us a little bit about how you see the raw body of students here and what does that look like?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (10:14):

Well, I'll tell you, it's not just simply the students who self-censor. It's the faculty too. And I know that because I was one of the very outspoken people from the very beginning coming here when I came first, came here before I even got my tenure, I was on the faculty senate. I was on academic centers and curriculum committee, I was in graduate council and I was a leader in all three of these areas. And that is not something that anybody is told. We are always told, you got to keep your head down. You weren't supposed to make waves. I never saw that as me. That's not authentic. So I understand why people do this. I know most people aren't like me. And I think that can be especially troubling at a place like an HBCU because that's what Winston-Salem State is. And I think that a lot of individuals here have come from difficult times. They have been kind of told, this is what you have to do, this is what you're supposed to do. You don't want to get yourself into trouble. So they try deliberately not to get themselves into trouble, and then they cease to be their authentic selves. And I think whenever you repress a part of your being, it kills a little bit of you. It's a problem. And I think that that's kind of one of my missions is try to coax them out of their shells

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (11:33):

To try to get them to do a little more. And I tell them all, look, you need to understand in my class you are going to have to oftentimes take positions. I do not want to hear a position that is parroting my position unless it's actually your position, and I still don't want you parroting me. I want you to your own stuff.

Doug Sprei (11:52):

Wait a you go further. We had a whole debate about this with faculty from Virginia about whether faculty should even let their students know what their personal position is like should faculty express their political or social viewpoints in class was a debate topic among the faculty. Are you saying that your students know your positions, but you're also telling them you don't have to feel pressured by my position? You can have your own free way of thinking about things. Is that what you're saying?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (12:20):

Well, if students ask me, I'll tell them. I mean, I'm not going to lie. So you

Doug Sprei (12:23):

Don't hold back.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (12:24):

I won't hold back. Why should I? It's again wonderful. It's the same thing. I'm not here to try to push a position. I want to make sure clear, I never push my positions, but it is very clear because I start off and I tell them my background, they have a right to know who their professors are. They have

Doug Sprei (12:42):

A right,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (12:43):

Right to know what my research is. They have a right to know what I've done. Look, I'm probably the only libertarian who has been published in rethinking Marxism for crying out loud. I've been the chief

economist in the city and county of San Francisco when Gavin Newsom was mayor and Kamala Harris was district attorney at the exact same time I was a registered libertarian. So I can easily work any side of it. And that's when I try to tell students, in fact, there's an old joke. I have a class that's called Moral and Ethical Foundation of Capitalism, and the joke was they all started out as capitalists because they're MBA students. Halfway through the class, I've already turned them all into communists and by the end of the class I've turned them back into capitalists. But now they know why they're capitalists. And that's kind of the important thing that I tell them is you need to be challenged.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (13:36):

I'm not going to sugarcoat things. I'm going to give you the other side. They may not be able to figure out exactly what I am because half the time they'll realize that one week I'll be arguing one side and the next week I'll be arguing the other. So I will give them a broad perspective because I tell them, you need to know all of these various viewpoints. I always say to everyone, I said, even if you want believe in a particular viewpoint, if you can't defeat the best argument of the other side, you have not won the debate.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (14:10):

You cannot engage with things by putting up strawman. And I don't want them putting up strawman. I want them to understand that and know what the best strategy are. And I can argue against myself. I can argue against any position that I happen to have. I can give you the other side, and I want them to be able to do that. And that doesn't mean, again, I don't want them to be in the sense that they don't take a position, but I want them to know enough about both sides best positions, that they understand why they're there, why it's reasonable, and how they can have a civil discourse with someone else who happens to have an opposite opinion without calling them names or anything else. To my mind, the only people who really are dumb are people who won't engage with other ideas that are so stuck in their ways. That's the only thing that they can think of. That's the only way that they can do it. And I'm saying that in the sense that they're not trying, they're actually admitting that they don't have a good argument when they do that, in my opinion. Because if you're sitting here and saying, well, there's only one way. There's only one thing. How do you have a dialogue? How do you have a discussion? How do you learn?

Kayla Johnston (15:25):

Just thinking back to your classroom debate and your business and ethics class on universal basic income and thinking about formulation of arguments and coming up with those through that experience and watching your students come up to the front of the room and try to formulate those arguments, what do you think that that experience did for them? Did you hear any conversation after the fact that they appreciated having a platform to flesh out those ideas?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (15:55):

Yeah, they did, and one of the things I loved about it was, to be honest with you, they took a different position than I would've.

Kayla Johnston (16:00):

Right. I remember that.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (16:01):

So that to me was wonderful because they did so they took on the arguments and they addressed them, and that was important to me. Again, I don't want to turn out autonom times. I don't want to turn out a bunch of people who look and sound and think like me. I want to have people who think for themselves, and as long as they understand the ramifications of everything, that's great. That's what I want to hear. I told students, it's like I've had students who've given me papers, which in my comparative economic systems class, for example, we compare capitalism and Marxism. I've had pure Marxists Canon papers well done. They've gotten a's failed students who give the libertarian line because all they did was they just copied everything out of what I said. I said, you didn't do any real research. You didn't do anything. You just said the professor said this and

Doug Sprei (17:02):

Your parents what they thought you wanted to hear,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (17:03):

And I don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear what their authentic selves are.

Doug Sprei (17:08):

Well, you're bucking the trend it seems to me because there's a lot of faculty out there who don't want to express their own personal viewpoints because they feel like that shows their hand and the students feel like they're going to have to pander to that and to get a good grade so forth. So they're kind of paralyzed there. You're taking a very different approach by showing them more about who you are, but that's to inspire them to be who they are.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (17:31):

That's exactly right. Now what we have to do is we are in a unique position here as educators. I think because this is the last time that unless they go into graduate school, this is the last time when they're going to have a place where they can have these kind of discussions that are open and available. And so we should give that to them. We should be making sure that this occurs, and if we hold back on who we are, I think it becomes a problem. At the same time, if we try to indoctrinate, that's another problem. You've got to make it so that students have a space. One of the founding principles as far as Chicago principles are concerned is that we are educating, we're not indoctrinated. And educating does mean providing people with who we are as well. I think that that's part of it, but we can't sit there and act as though our opinions are the only opinions that are right. I actually write with people from across the political spectrum too,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (18:28):

And when I do that, I end up moving them closer to my position. I move closer to theirs. We come up with something that's kind of in the middle. It's kind of a bridging way. It's a conversation. And I think that that's the type of mentality and thought process that I want students to have because when they walk into the world, they're not going to meet a bunch of people who just sound and think like them. They're going to meet with a lot of people who have a lot of variety of opinions and viewpoints, and if you cannot live in that space, you are not going to make it in this world. And so it's extremely important that we teach tolerance of the opinions of others. We understand. We understand the pluses and minuses of various things. We understand that we can speak up and we should speak up.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (19:11):

I mean, that's part of also when I teach business ethics, I said, you should be always willing to go to your boss and tell them what you think. If there's some issue. I always said, it's my responsibility and every time I've had a position, it's my responsibility to tell my manager that, Hey, I don't think this is working. This is not right. I'm doing right by the organization. Now there's a right way and a wrong way to do that. The right way is to do it within the organization unless the organization is doing something illegal, at which point you can whistle blow, but you do not air the dirty laundry. And I think that's part of the problem that people go one of two ways. They shut down completely or they start going onto social media blabbing about everything, and that does no good either because now you've just made everybody defensive. You've got to be able to have the conversations with the people you disagree with. That's the important thing.

Kayla Johnston (20:06):

How challenging is it or have you experienced or do you think that it is for students here in other universities too in this day and age of not either shutting down or going directly to social media? How challenging is it revealing these kinds of programmings and this opportunity to speak to each other openly and to get them in those spaces to practice that instead of reverting back to that fight or flight essentially?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (20:34):

I think it's extremely challenging. I think that's why I love braver angel space. I think that they help you get to that point where you start being able to talk to people. I think as well, there's a huge for people not to be able to think of other people as people. This is really, I think, increased in proportion with social media. There's a lot more antagonism. There's a lot more stereotyping of people. There's

Doug Sprei (21:03):

No consequences

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (21:04):

On social media for that.

Doug Sprei (21:05):

Yeah,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (21:06):

Well, there's no consequences of social media for that, but there's consequences outside of social media for being on social media. And that's one of the problems that a lot of students don't understand. We just were talking about this in my business ethics class where people were going on to social media and were doing things that ended up disparaging their companies that they worked for, and as a result they got fired.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (21:31):

And again, you need to understand time and place and purpose and everything else. And that's also, in fact, even when we talk about free speech on campus, we talk about regulations of time, manner, and place. I think that that also is an aspect and why we don't allow things like the heckler's veto. We don't allow somebody to shout down somebody you don't like. Now you're perfectly free to go and have a

counter protest outside as long as you aren't interfering with their ability to speak. That's perfectly reasonable too. But it seems as though we have people, a lot of people really like to say that they're in favor of freedom of speech, but when a push comes to shove, what they're really in favor of is only freedom for them to speak. And that has got to be changed in this society because we can't function as a society if we take that position.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (22:23):

And that's I think, very clear. That's why you don't want to have indoctrination. That's why you don't want to have the heckler's veto. That's why you don't want to have the government coming around and deciding ahead of time what you can and cannot do. That's why we don't want to get into things like we talk about things like microaggressions on campus. Look, I'm the first person to say that I do not think it's appropriate for you to go out of your way to try to antagonize someone. At the same time though, a lot of people are calling these things microaggressions when they are simply people who make an innocent mistake. And now what you've done is you've thrown the two types of individuals into the same pot and you've destroyed all possible mechanisms for any kind of civil discourse. At that point, we've got to be clear that individuals need to be treated as individuals and with respect. Yes, but we also need to be clear that there are going to be times when people are going to be offended and there was no intention to give offense. And I think that's a very important thing. You should never try to offend other people, but you also should never assume the other person is trying to offend you.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (23:40):

When you give students a space that they understand, it's safe for them to say things, this is why call

Doug Sprei (23:46):

Me Mr. Chair. Right?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (23:47):

We have the Mr Chair. Exactly. Don't go and talk to the other debater directly.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (23:53):

And of course that's from the parliamentary procedure that I learned for many years. You always address the chair and you refer to the member from Hamilton or the member, the honored member from this. It works. And of course, the other thing, of course that we were always told, you never pick up a pen or pencil a weapon. So there are these kinds of things which tend to lower the temperature in the room, allowing you to have civil discourse. And I think that one of the issues is, again, we tend to have this misunderstanding of how much people understand our own positions,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (24:33):

Understand where we're coming from. We start to think that everybody should just have every bit of knowledge about us and why don't they understand what we're saying and this kind of thing? And no, they don't. They won't. Won't until you talk. I don't know about you until you open your mouth. So until you do that, you are a blank slate to me except what I may have. I have your name, I have your major, I have whatever, maybe few things you've written, but those are very stilted. I don't know whether or not you're authentic or not until you speak up and are given the opportunity for authenticity,

Doug Sprei (25:10):

But they have to have some faith that you are there to be there, listen to them and not judge them.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (25:16):

Exactly. And so what I always tell students is that when you go through, and I just was grading a bunch of papers today and if you went and looked at my comments, it's clear if you have, again, this is outside of your bravery angels, but this is how in teaching, how I deal with things, a proper properly sourced material from a reputable source, meaning an academic source. So academic sources are on every single area. Every single opinion is in there, and you've backed it up in this way, properly documented. You're getting full credit, you're getting full credit in these things. It doesn't matter what your opinion is. I don't even look at what your opinion is. I'm not looking for that. I'm looking for whatever you had. Did you back up your stuff? Does it make sense? Is it connected to whatever it is that your position is?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (26:05):

If you're not connecting it, if you're not having verified sources, if it's pure opinion, this isn't something that I'm interested in for an academic paper, now you have a debate. You can bring in your own experiences, things. It's a different type of environment. It's fine if you want to talk facts and figures, but I know that in any kind of discussion, oftentimes that's not what's going to win the argument. It's going to be your authentic self. Well, you know what? I can also tell whether or not you're authentic or not. Just listening to how you were speaking and looking at how animated you are, I can tell,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (26:44):

And there are sometimes when I'll bring a student aside, I said, did you really think that? Because it seemed like you weren't your authentic self. Now it's okay if you are, but I just want to make sure that it wasn't some pressure that you felt to conform. And sometimes they'll tell me it was really feeling, don't feel that way. What are you worried about? You're worried about me judging you. I won't judge you. You're worried about the students, other students. Okay, yes, maybe some will, but how many of them do you really know? And you're going to continue to know. You send 'em one class, general education class, if you're going to still see them, maybe they're even in your major. Okay, fine. They're your contemporaries and things. They're not holding sway over you or not. Why do you want so badly to fit in when you graduate? You're not going to see them anymore. This doesn't make sense to me because the more that you gravitate towards being one of the group, the less individuality you have yourself and you start to lose yourself in the process. This is not what we're trying to do here. We're not trying to create a bunch of people who all engage in groupthink. That's a dangerous situation, because then the person who controls the group controls the decision. We don't want that. What we want is we want everybody to come together and through this dialogue process, you come to your own decisions. That's the whole point of a democratic republic. Like what we have in the United States. We are not a dictatorship and we should not strive to be one.

Kayla Johnston (28:21):

So from my experiences running debates, being a part of debates over the past two years now, I believe there is a genuine hunger from students to want to express their opinions freely. But there's also a culture of fear, whether it relates to social media and they've seen backlash of saying one thing and it going viral or feeling ostracized from even the members of their own group, and they disagree with some element. I think there is a culture of fear that we need to move past or that's why I love these debates is because a lot of the times, let me back up a little bit. So a lot of the times when we start in a

debate scenario, there is some hesitancy. You can feel it in the room. There's still that fear of, okay, I have something to say, but I'm not sure if it's a comfortable space yet to do that.

Kayla Johnston (29:18):

But in the midst of people being brave enough to speak first, they really do set the example of this is a space where we can talk about things genuinely, authentically, and it's okay. It's not devolving into a bitter back and forth, and this is an okay place for me to express my opinions. I think a lot of the times it's kind of baby steps for some folks that are maybe more afraid to speak their genuine authentic self, which I do agree is very important. But yeah, these debates, they provide that format and we hear that time and time again in our debriefs.

Doug Sprei (29:57):

This reminds me, there was something I had wanted to tell you about last night's debate at Upstate. We had a really crescendo effect in the debate where what Caleb was just talking about, the students really caught fire with the topic and the shy ones came out of the woodwork and started really making speeches. So then after we concluded the formal part of the debate, we always do this debrief where we're not going to debate the topic anymore, but just talk about what we've just experienced a little bit. How the students view the parliamentary format. What did they, what did they learn? One student spoke up and she said, well, she's the president or the leader of the app State Debate Society. She says, in our debates, personal storytelling is not allowed. Everything we do is based on facts, factual arguments. And I thought she was going to start to become critical of our format, but instead she said, I found this so refreshing that people were telling their own personal stories and she felt like so free in our format in a way that, and we give a lot of respect to formal debate. There's a real intellectual rigor to it, but there's something about the atmosphere that we created was for all the other people for whom debating doesn't come naturally and a key to accelerating the effect that you were talking about. So just from baby steps to something faster,

Doug Sprei (31:17):

Giving them encouragement to tell their own personal stories. So a lot of people spoke about growing up in a very religious family to the topic of religion and education, and they were telling personal stories and one person was like half Japanese, so she has a Buddhist grandmother and a very doctrinaire Christian family. It was all kinds of wonderful anecdotes being shared that were very personal, and what that did was kind of tug at people's heartstrings and get everybody really listening to each other a lot more intensely.

Kayla Johnston (31:47):

It makes those personal stories make those spaces feel even safer because people are vulnerable sharing their life experiences. Those are always beautiful moments in every debate that I've been a part of and very impactful and allow not only that person sharing that perspective to kind of flesh out their own ideas. Maybe they're not walking in there with a fully formed document, but

Doug Sprei (32:09):

Most of the time they're not.

Kayla Johnston (32:09):

Right. And that's okay when we tell people that's okay, it's a starting point, right? People are listening and hearing your experiences and you never know. Perhaps it's shaping theirs as they're sitting there listening to you. It's a wonderful place to just workshop ideas too.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (32:25):

Well, what I like too was we had the bravery angels debate in your classroom. In the classroom. Yes. We had the students doing this. Remember at the very end, and somebody asked me, what do you think they asked me? And of course I give my opinion, and of course my opinion is really not one way or the other, I think is very in the middle kind of thing. Very nuanced.

Kayla Johnston (32:48):

Very nuanced.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (32:49):

But I think that that's also important for them to understand that. I think a lot of them, probably after I talked to them and later we had the other things that I got them to do write up of this afterwards, I found that they had a lot of nuance in their own opinions at this point, not the same nuance I have. So it wasn't as though they were trying to pair what I had, but it was good because they started to see that there wasn't this one way of only thinking about things. And I really love, again, that personal aspect, that personal touch, because one of the classic issues, because I've been a formal debater as well, and I know about all of the facts and things, but for example, if you read my own research, I do research sometimes in dealing with undocumented immigration,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (33:37):

And if you read it, it will sound like, oh, well, I mean he's saying this is good. This is all the things that are happening. Yeah. Well, if you ask me my personal opinion against undocumented immigration, but that's not an economics. It's not because of economics. I'm an economics professor, so I do economics work. And so what I can do is I can tell you on an economic standpoint, undocumented immigration, it has a positive economic benefit, but you also see the human fallout and Yeah, exactly. And I also think that there's a big problem from a political standpoint of allowing individuals to cross the border without authorization. My wife is an immigrant. My father was an immigrant. They went through the process of doing it, the documented so-called correct way.

Doug Sprei (34:18):

All my grandparents were…

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (34:19):

Immigrants…. I go back very far on my mother's side. So we go back to the 1820s, which always shocks people when they see my name, they says, how could you possibly be? And American said, my family's probably been near this country more than yours family has because I can go back to the 1820s. So we were fought during the Civil War, and the war was Spanish American and World War I, world War ii, all of this. But that's neither here nor there. I said that my position was that we should have a different program that should allow people to come in, like the old Bracero program. That's what if someone asked me, that's what I would want, a temporary program for agricultural workers. That's what most of

these people want. They're not here to stay here permanently. They're here to send money back to have a good life. Wherever they were, that's fine. But what we've done is we've polarized everything into thinking it's this way or it's that way. Same thing with abortion. You either have, life begins a conception, we have ability to have your abortion on demand until ninth month. These things aren't really real things anyway. 90% of abortions are not anywhere in those spaces. We're talking about a very small amount, and yet people stick out positions and I think they become more and more extreme, especially on social, because that's how you get viral.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (35:40):

That's how you get trending.

Kayla Johnston (35:41):

It's incentivized.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (35:42):

You are incentivizing the more extreme elements in our society to talk. And I think what I like about braver angels is it kind of does the opposite. You still can have the extreme element, but because everybody is acknowledged, I love the fact when you do the hands on the desk, pat

Doug Sprei (36:02):

Tapping or snapping

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (36:03):

Or snapping, you do it for every person. And that equality of expression of thinking people, not about really about the point as much as thank you for sharing your opinion, I think goes a long way towards encouraging this kind of dialogue and really making the academy what is always supposed to be a place where we can come together, express ideas, discuss ideas, and do so in a civil matter. This is the way education is supposed to be, especially higher education.

Doug Sprei (36:39):

That was quite magnificent what was just said.

Doug Sprei (36:42):

We've covered some. I'm really delighted with the kind of content that's come out here. Where my thinking is right now is just gratitude that our program can work with Winston-Salem State University. It's an HBCU. It's an honor to work with an HBCU. We want to get more of those off the ground. I'm starting to observe they have a little bit of a dynamic of their own. Yes, it's really been delightful to come to each school and learn something about the particular fingerprint of that school. So tell us a little bit about what makes WSSU unique?

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (37:15):

Well, WSSU has a number of things going for it. One of the big things is social mobility. So we have the Center for the Study of Economic Mobility. I'm happened to be a fellow research fellow with them, and that has been, what was interesting was there's a social mobility index that's put out by College net

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (37:32):

And every single year we are located in the top 20 schools in the entire country. So if you look at the 3000 schools, we are in the top 20 in terms of social mobility. Social mobility. We take students, because you look at our student body, it is predominantly black. We happen, we do actually have a large white population over nursing. So we have a huge nursing. But do you have a lot of first gen students? We have huge numbers as first gen students, huge numbers of students. I believe close to 80, maybe 85% are on Pell Grant eligible. I mean, so we take students who are in lower income families and we put them directly into the middle and upper middle class. That's what we do. We have actually the highest amount of earnings in the entire state among all of the universities in our state, the University of North Carolina system for students coming out. And we only know about students who come and work here in North Carolina. So there's a little bit of a bias there because I'm sure people at Chapel Hill when they're making money, they're going off to New York State and other places. But for students who graduate and stay in the state, we have the highest level of employment and income of any of the schools.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (38:46):

In terms of undergraduate, we're second, I think only to NC State in terms of graduate. So that by itself is indicative of what we're doing, especially when you look at the population that we start off with because we don't have, if you go to most of the schools, especially the non HBCUs, you'll have a lot fewer people who are on Pell Grants, for example. And so that's part of the social mobility mission of this university. I think what we do is, I like to say we take people off of welfare, we turn 'em into taxpayers. That's the big thing, and that's a huge benefit for the state, and it's a benefit that oftentimes I think is overlooked because they'll still sit here and they'll try to compare us to everybody else in the system. We're not like everybody else in the system. We have a unique mission. We have a unique area that we're focused. Now, a lot of our students also, unfortunately, because of the nature of where we're at, we have a graduation rate in the forties. And so that's where a lot of them will start saying, well, you weren't graduating. We give people chances. And to be honest with you, I think that's also true about bravery Angels is that you take people who never had a chance to speak, never had a chance to talk, you give 'em chances, lo and behold, and they flourish. They flourish. Exactly.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (40:04):

And people don't realize that just because somebody comes here, and I can't stand this idea that somebody comes to university, they don't succeed, they leave after two or three years, and that's a failure. That's not a failure. Number one, those students know this wasn't right for them. That to me is a win as especially if they do it early enough. Number two, they still learn something here. It's not as though you come to a university and you didn't learn anything for three or four years. You have some skills. I would say that somebody who has those skill sets, if they've learned proper skills, they didn't waste their time

Doug Sprei (40:41):

And they've been exposed to something they never would've been exposed to.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (40:44):

Exactly. And I think part of the problem is that we have such a bifurcated idea about universities that if we went and did that on a national level, what you'd have is everybody would only have elite universities, and that would be all we would have. What one of the biggest problems really, we talk about diversity and of course people talk about diversity, equity, inclusion, access. I've always argued

that they have it all wrong. Diversity is not about the color of your skin. Diversity is not about your gender. Diversity is not about any of these immutable factors. It's not even about things that are semi mutable like religion, all the so-called protected classes. What diversity is, is about the diversity of experiences that you have and diversity of opinions that are present. I've seen, and I tell students this, just because you get a bunch of people in a room that are various races and gender and ages and all this, and you put 'em in a room, if they all went to the same Ivy League school, they're all probably going to think the same.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (41:50):

That's a sad commentary, but it's true. If you get instead a bunch of people who have a bunch of different experiences, even if by the way, they aren't diverse in the sense of what you would see, but they have different experiences they're going to have bring different things to the table. And now we get the actual things that we want from diversity, which is we want diverse opinions, we want diverse perspectives. We want people to come and feel as though they can talk. See, that's the other thing about braver angels that is so important. If we don't have the ability to speak up when you see something, if you don't feel as though you can break out of groupthink, then what you end up with is you end up with a lot of people going into the business world and you end up following somebody right off the cliff like a bunch of lemmings. I think that is really abysmal. I think this is a terrible way for us to do things. I'll say this, I'll be very frank. I think there's a problem when we have on the Supreme Court, everybody's from the top schools. I think when we put everybody into these positions, we put 'em all from the top places. I want to see diversity in terms of experiences, lived experiences and opinions I want as if I were president. I would pick one, not unlike what Abraham Lincoln did, a cabinet of rivals,

Doug Sprei (43:15):

Team of rivals….

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (43:17):

Because then they still know we are going for a specific purpose. But I want get all of those opinions together. And I always tell students when I was managing, I still manage things. I say when I'm a manager, I want everybody to be able to have an opinion. I want everybody able to speak. I want there to be complete openness. You do know that it's not a democracy at that point because if there's 11 people in the room, all those 10 have 10 votes. And me as the head of it, I have 11 votes, so I can't overrule. But obviously if everybody's against it, it's not going to happen. So I do kind of have to get enough people over, but they also need to understand, and you see, if you don't have understanding, if you don't have dialogue, if you don't feel as though you can speak up, what you're going to do is you're going to sink the policy that's being done.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (44:08):

This is the whole so-called deep state as people have referred to it, which I don't buy the notion of that in the sense that in the political sense, but I do buy it in the sense that I think that you have vested interests who will sit here and say, in any organization, the leadership will come and we will stay. And they don't implement the things because the leadership has not had the ability to reach out to the rank and file and have honest conversations and tell them, you are free to speak up. It doesn't mean we're going to necessarily do it. Like I said, it's something dealing with academia. We have something called shared governance, and I think a lot of faculty don't understand shared governance.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (44:52):

Shared governance does not mean what you think it means. It doesn't mean the faculty get a veto over policy. It means faculty get a say. It means you should be consulting with faculty before you implement anything you do. But it does not mean that you have to listen to the faculty. You just have to, in a sense of listening, in the sense of doing what they want, you have to listen to them to understand what their perspectives are, to understand where the issues are. And when you go against them, you understand that it might not work out because they may not follow you, but you need to be aware of that. And I think that's where a lot of leaders should. Honestly, I think this braver Angels format should be adopted not just in the schools, but even in companies.

Doug Sprei (45:37):

Oh, well, and I said to myself after that first presidential election in September, and I don't mean to embarrass you, Kayla, but there's people on our team like Kayla or Sadie or others who could have chaired that presidential debate a lot better than it was chaired and brought something else that would be more valuable for the nation, in my opinion. And anyway, a lot of the stuff you just brought up into the business world, and maybe next time we talk, we'll get a little bit more insight into your thinking there too, because I know you're an entrepreneur and we'd like to maybe learn a little bit more about that next time. But for now, I think we should sign off and conclude by saying again, we're very grateful to be working with you as a faculty fellow here. I hope that we can find a couple of students to step up and be fellows with you so that we can just germinate the program in a big way. That would be great. It's really growing like gangbusters in North Carolina, thanks to Kayla and the team, and we feel very blessed.

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (46:39):

Well, Doug, Kayla, I want to just thank you for the opportunity to be a member of this. It is wonderful. Whatever you do as a professor, too often people don't get to see, don't get to know about what we do in the classroom. I think that's also why academia has not necessarily the most favorable outlook from people. It's why I like to see us shine these bright lights on things. That's why I've loved it when you came Kayla to my classroom and helped chair the debate. It's important that we tell these stories and that we allow students to tell these stories and that we encourage this. Because otherwise, what we end up with, I think, is we all go into our little factions and we don't actually understand what is going on out there. And I think it allows bad actors to exist simply because they can hide, but we shine a bright light on this, they won't be able to do that.

Doug Sprei (47:34):

Well, thanks so much for spending time with us. Yeah,

Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi (47:36):

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.