

The Politics Classroom

Host: Professor Floros

Ep. 2022.29: Teaching Doctors to Teach Other Doctors How to Be Better Doctors

In the Classroom: Professor Nicole A. Perez

(Bridge to Faculty Postdoctoral Scholar, Department of Medical Education, UIC)

Professor Floros: Whenever I need to visit a new medical professional, I always try to find a female doctor, dentist, optometrist, or nurse practitioner. Whether rightly or wrongly, I believe that a female provider will listen to me and take my concerns more seriously than a male doctor will. I have some experience that supports that belief, but I have not done a rigorous analysis on the topic.

Many people, however, avoid going to the doctor because of bad experiences with previous providers, doctors who did not share certain characteristics with them and made assumptions or relied on stereotypes in making their diagnoses or treatment plans. The American medical establishment has many innovations and achievements of which to be proud, but those achievements are built on a history and structure of racism, sexism, and poorly serving communities in desperate need of medical expertise informed by lived reality.

To better serve the underserved in the US, American medical schools need to train health professionals about the existence and impact of medical racism and support students of color as they progress through their health education. Today's guest, Professor Nicole Perez, is working to achieve both of those goals. I can't wait to hear what she has to say.

So, let's get started in The Politics Classroom recorded on January 13, 2023.

Intro & Outro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age

Professor Floros: Welcome to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Kate Floros, a Clinical Associate Professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. You can find me on Twitter and TikTok @Dr. Floros. You can also find more information about me and the show at thepoliticsclassroom.org.

My guest in the classroom today is Professor Nicole A. Perez. Professor Perez is a Bridge to Faculty scholar in the Department of Medical Education in the College of Medicine at UIC. She received her bachelor's degree in Sociology and Chicano and Chicano studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara and a master's and PhD in sociology from the University of Notre Dame.

Before joining the Department of Medical Education, Professor Perez was a postdoctoral research associate in the office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs and Academic Programs, and the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at UIC. Professor Perez is the author or co-author of several journal articles, book chapters, and research reports, including "Nested Context of Reception: Latinx Identity Development Across a New Immigrant Community," "Pathways to Early departure from college: The interrelated and precarious role of finances among Black and Latinx students," and "Exploring predictors of being on-track for college students."

She's currently at work on several articles in the realm of the success of Latinx students in the Health Professions. Professor Nicole Perez, welcome to The Politics Classroom.

Professor Perez: Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Professor Floros: So I always ask my first time guests a variation of the following question. You trained as a sociologist working on issues of race and ethnicity, education, immigration inequality, but you are currently a Bridge to Faculty scholar in the Department of Medical Education in the College of Medicine at UIC. So first, how did you get interested in the topics of race, ethnicity, education, immigration, inequality, and how did that lead you as a sociologist to be in a medical education department?

Professor Perez: Yeah, so I first got interested in, um, primarily education. So I come from, uh, the Bay Area, so near San Francisco, uh, specifically Hayward, California.

And I was always attuned to educational inequalities as I saw my peers make different transitions out of high school. And to me, the transition out of high school was pretty difficult. As a first-generation college student, I really didn't know how to navigate the system, how to really apply to college and so that really was frustrating to know that because my parents didn't go to college, I didn't necessarily have the same resources and access to information.

Professor Floros: Mm.

Professor Perez: And so essentially my lived personal experience became this foundation where I then was able to go to college at UC, Santa Barbara, and kind of explore in further detail why is it that certain people are kind of funneled into these different pathways.

It's very structural how these pathways kind of work out. It's not necessarily that people have complete choice or agency to end up where they're at, right? And so, so yeah, at Santa Barbara, I ended up double majoring in sociology and Chica and Chicano studies. Not everyone knows what that means. So essentially it's like a form of Latina and Latino studies or Latinx studies, but the Chicana and Chicano term is very specific to the southwest region of California. And it's not necessarily an ethnic term but more of a political identification. And so, um, with those two majors, I was able to really coalesce my interests in educational inequalities, but also kind of look at how it's linked to race and immigration.

And I had really good professors that pushed me to, to think critically, to, to write well. And I then became interested in doing research. And so I had mentors that were amazing. That guided me as a first-generation college student to seek opportunities that would prepare me for my transition out of college.

And so I ended up doing the McNair Scholars Program, which is a federally funded research program for underrepresented, uh, low income first generation students to do research and it essentially is a structured program that gets you to graduate school. And so it's a two year program where you choose a mentor that's gonna guide you in the research process. You study for the GREs. They have all these resources to kind of prepare you for that next transition. And so I would say that, half of my time in college, I was already preparing for, um, the transition to graduate school to obtain my PhD, and I became further and further interested in exploring the topics of race, ethnicity, immigration, inequality in graduate school.

But I just wasn't sure, uh, what would be the right program. So, I definitely had a moment where, I could have done my PhD in education. I could have done ethnic studies. And then the third option was sociology. And so, I kind of applied like all over the place with the exception of ethnic studies, but primarily education and then sociology.

And ultimately, I figured that, these big concepts of race, ethnicity, immigration, inequality. I could do more in sociology than if I were to go to education. And so that's how I made my decision to pursue those topics in sociology and graduate school.

Professor Floros: So, your McNair scholarship was while you were at undergrad, correct?

Professor Perez: Correct, yes.

Professor Floros: Okay. I had, I've never heard of that program, so I need to look into it for some of my students I think.

Professor Perez: Yeah, I, I know UIC doesn't have it. I wish they did.

Professor Floros: Oh, they don't?

Professor Perez: No, it's not at every college campus. So, because it's federally funded, they're very limited in how many programs they have across the country.

And in fact, I remember back in 2010, they were threatening to, to get rid of it at my own institution because the federal monies were running low.

Professor Floros: Hmm.

Professor Perez: And so they found a way to get funding elsewhere and to make sure that the program didn't die. But I know at other institutions, lack of funds definitely made it so that McNair didn't exist anymore at their school, which is like really sad because it's a really good program, and without it, like I, I don't know. I don't know if I would've gotten my PhD without it. Maybe like eventually, but not directly out of college.

Professor Floros: A lot of colleges and universities are at least rhetorically talking about supporting historically excluded groups and this kind of program sounds like the exact type of thing that would support groups who are, are not well represented in the academy.

Professor Perez: Correct.

Professor Floros: It's a shame that, is this like a congressional appropriation thing or?

Professor Perez: I think, so my critique generally that I have, because I'm so entrenched in higher ed and with my experience and like my research and my, my previous postdoc job, the way I see it is that we have so many programs that are doing really good work, and when they're grant funded, specifically, grant money runs out.

Professor Floros: Yeah.

Professor Perez: And so, if the program is not institutionalized and the money runs out, then the program ends there. And so, we have people that are doing amazing work and helping students get to the academy or helping students get to where they want to be, right? With the right support, mentorship, resources, information, and so forth.

But when we're not providing the institutionalization of these programs beyond grant funds, then that's where the challenge is at, and like the barriers are at, because then we have this like continual struggle to apply to grant funds and kind of reinvent the wheel.

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: when we already have good programs in place. So it's just a matter of funds basically.

Professor Floros: Yeah.

Professor Perez: Yeah,

Professor Floros: Isn't it always?

Professor Perez: Yeah.

Professor Floros: Okay. So, your first position at UIC is not your current position, which is a Bridge to Faculty scholar in the Department of Medical Education. So can you tell me about how you go, you went from earning your PhD to the process that got you where you are today.

Professor Perez: Yeah. So the job market is always like a crazy process.

Professor Floros: Yes.

Professor Perez: And a nightmare in and of itself. So I completed my PhD in 2019 and at that time I had the option of pursuing a tenure track job, um, in sociology at an institution. But ultimately, it wasn't a good fit for me for a lot of reasons. And, um, at the same time I was told about this postdoc job at UIC.

So, uh, when I looked at the call for the postdoc job at UIC, I thought it very much aligned with my training and what I was passionate about. And so that postdoc job was, um, my supervisor was Susan Farruggia, who is now in Student Affairs at UIC. And so in that postdoc, I was there for two, a little over two years, and essentially my role, um, in that office was to really understand the first year retention rate at UIC and how we could improve it.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: We know that there's big disparities in the retention rate across race and ethnicity at UIC.

Professor Floros: Okay,

Professor Perez: And so. We use this metric that was developed in CPS schools, CPS high schools called to be, um, On Track.

And so we adopted or adapted, I would, I should say this On Track kind of framework to UIC to develop this algorithm to say, you know, if you meet these thresholds, then you are more likely to be

retained in the first year. And we know that if you're retained in the first year, your likelihood of finishing college is much higher than folks that are not retained in the first year or even the first semester. Like the first year is critical in college.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: So that was like mostly quantitative institutional research for the university where I learned a lot, but I also had the chance to do more qualitative type of studies that looked at interviews with primarily Black and Latinx students that were pushed out of UIC in the first year. So we really dug into these processes of why they didn't continue at UIC.

Professor Floros: What were some of the conclusions?

Professor Perez: Essentially in that, in that study, which is published, Susan Farruggia and myself, we concluded that there's this kind of, this like hidden cost of like time and money, like the intersection of like time resource, but also financial resource, uh, works in a way that like pushes these students out, right? So if they come from low income backgrounds, well they have to work while they're at UIC, and that creates this like limited amount of time where they can't study. Well, if they can't study, then their grades drop. And so it's just like this vicious cycle of time, resources, and time allocation, but also financial constraints that really make it difficult for people to stay enrolled.

Professor Floros: And was that like they just couldn't work enough to, to earn the money or they couldn't succeed in their classes because they were working so much to earn the money?

Professor Perez: Yeah, like I vividly remember this one student, which completely like broke my heart because he was working at night more than eight hours, and then he would try to show up to his classes in the morning without sleeping, without probably even eating. How do we expect someone to succeed relative to their peer who like didn't work at night, you know?

Professor Floros: Right.

Professor Perez: And so they're already like so far behind to even having the opportunity to show up and be ready, um, for classes and to learn, right? And a lot of times they're in situations where they needed the funds to like pay for UIC and register for classes, but also to put food on the table.

Like, sure, you know, it's much more complicated coming from an under-resourced community or family and also being, you know, first generation in college and not really knowing again, how to navigate such a complex system that really wasn't built for, for folks like us, you know?

Professor Floros: Yeah. And did that research lead to any new programs or any new initiatives at UIC to try and, and help these students?

Professor Perez: Yeah, actually toward the end of my kind of, um, postdoc with Sue, they were able to apply to some grants, and they did this all in like the Dean of Student Affairs, um, and in that office. And so what they did is they identified students that were like academically On Track through that metric, but the only kind of barrier that they had was, uh, they didn't have the funds to register for classes.

So what this grant money did was they paid off their bill, um, through the financial aid office so that they could like register for classes and proceed in their studies, right? And so what we learned from

this study, it was like a small, it was a pilot study, right? So we wanted to see like what would it mean if we gave students, paid their, um, their bill so that they could continue, right? And what we found was with exception of one student, all students were retained at UIC.

Professor Floros: Wow.

Professor Perez: After the funds were given to them, right. And there was also programming that was, um, given. In addition to the funds, right? So there was, um, how to manage your money, how to make a budget, how to, um, like if you're looking to rent an apartment, how do you do that? What are your rights as a tenant, right? And so there was like all these awesome kind of workshops that they had access to to help them feel more confident with financial kind of processes.

Professor Floros: These kinds of programs are amazing. There's another program that UIC started. If you have an internship, an unpaid internship, you can apply to get funds so that you can not work but still make money, but get that job experience, right? And it's, it's those students who need the most support, but for whom that support makes a huge difference.

Professor Perez: Exactly. Yeah. So my, um, Susan Farruggia, she was involved with that, um, program as well. So, so yeah, Student Affairs is doing, um, pretty awesome things at UIC for sure.

Professor Floros: Okay. But you are no longer in Student Affairs?

Professor Perez: I am not, yes.

Professor Floros: So how do you go from first year students to medical students?

Professor Perez: Yeah. If someone would've told me three, four years ago that I would be where I'm at now, I would be, I wouldn't believe them. And so I think that taking it back to my point about like the job market and kind of it being so stressful and kind of, um, quirky to say the least.

And it was in the middle of a pandemic, right? So that adds a whole other layer. So when I started at UIC, the Bridge to the Faculty program was completely new, and so I knew about it. I knew that it was something that I would be super interested in given my own kind of trajectory and involvement with these kind of pipeline program.

And so once I was, you know, kind of like eligible to apply, I was really motivated to. So the Bridge to the Faculty program, I guess I, maybe I should explain it. I'm in the second cohort, and so it's UIC's kind of new initiative to increase, um, underrepresented folks in the academy. And so what they do is that, um, Office of Diversity, the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, they bring in this cohort of scholars from all over campus, different departments, and they offer you this postdoc position.

So you do two years in your respective department, and then once the two years are done, you transition to the tenure track, assistant professor position. There's a process where the department has to apply. To say that we need, or we want a Bridge to the Faculty scholar, this is the way that we're gonna support them.

And it's usually departments that have a gap in their faculty and also departments that could really benefit from kind of a diverse person, like be it their background or their, their research approach or their interest. And so when I applied there was a spot in higher ed and so I was like really interested in that spot and I thought it made sense given the postdoc work that, that I previously did at UIC.

Professor Floros: So, like in the Department of Education?

Professor Perez: Yeah.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: Yes, it was, uh, specifically for urban higher ed.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: So I was like super excited about the prospects and kind of what the options and opportunities would be, uh, for that transition. At the same time, I was doing the separate research project where I met a person, a faculty member from the Department of Medical Education, and we just like happened to cross paths and he told me about the Bridge to Faculty spot in his department.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: And I was a little confused because I never thought of myself, as, for sure I'm not a medical sociologist. Like first and foremost, I don't label myself as such. Right? And so I was very confused about like why he thought I could be a good candidate for that, for that position. And so we had a few email exchanges and he kind of framed it in this way where a lot of times we have to be open to like opportunities and keep our options kind of open, right? So essentially I was being recruited, but I didn't know.

Professor Floros: Why?

Professor Perez: Why? Yeah.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: And thankfully, like I went along with it and I'm so glad I did because you know, I applied, even though I was still confused, I still applied and I was invited to, you know, do the, the interview and it was through the interview process where I got to meet the faculty in the Department of Medical Education and realized they're all from different disciplines. Like no one really is like trained in medical education, right? There's psychometricians, anthropologists. There's people from humanities, there's psychologists. Um, so we're kind of all over the place.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: It's like really, really cool.

Professor Floros: Let's take a break. You're listening to Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

Transition Music: The Sheriff is in Town by Adam Saban

Professor Floros: Welcome back to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and my guest is Professor Nicole Perez from the UIC Department of Medical Education.

Okay, and so does the Department of Medical Education teach the teachers of health professionals how to teach the health professionals better? What's the mission of the department?

Professor Perez: Yeah, I think that's part of it.

So our big program is the Masters in Health Professions Education. And so our students are primarily physicians. So these are folks that have already done all of their schooling. They're working full-time health professionals from all over the country.

Some of 'em are even residents, right? They come on like a specific kind of educational fellowship where they can have time to do this master's degree in, um, health professions education. And so, my teaching experience is not as extensive as others. Like I, I was more focused on research as opposed to teaching.

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm,

Professor Perez: but the students in our program are very, very smart and they make my job very, very easy, to say the least.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: They're taught how to do research. They're taught how to be better leaders. Because they're not taught how to do research in medical school. Right?

Professor Floros: Right.

Professor Perez: So that's essentially like two major things that we teach in our program is they come to do this degree because they wanna be leaders at their respective institutions or hospitals, and then they wanna be better researchers.

Professor Floros: I understand there's this idea of medical racism where physicians do not necessarily have a cultural competency with other groups and that that can lead to poor outcomes for their patients. And so does your department have anything to do with helping aspiring physicians to be aware of these things?

Professor Perez: Yeah, I just taught that elective. So it's considered like this, like diversity elective, but I got to kind of build it the way I wanted to. And so before I got to my department, the course was taught in a different way, uh, to kind of cover this diversity elective. But when I came in as a sociologist of race ethnicity, I wanted to ground it in that kind of foundational literature. And so I will say, it seems as if I'm kind of like starting that trajectory in my department.

Professor Floros: Okay. I guess I used a word I didn't know how to use, but can you just quickly define what cultural competency is and maybe the limitations of it?

Professor Perez: Sure. So cultural competency means that like we are different people, we have different cultures, and if you just understand that, then you're competent in knowing that there's different cultures, like end of story.

Professor Floros: Seriously?!?!?!?

Professor Perez: More rooted in the individual and like the, the culture of that community.

Professor Floros: So it has nothing to do with knowing anything about another culture, it's just knowing that ano, that another culture exists?

Professor Perez: Yeah. It, it, it is knowing about the culture.

Professor Floros: Oh, okay.

Professor Perez: But I think knowing about the culture is very different than knowing that there are these like structural inequalities that are tied to race.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: That's very different.

Professor Floros: Okay. okay

Professor Perez: So the issue of medical racism and the issue of kind of having physicians that are better prepared and trained to deal with racial and ethnic inequality is rather new in medical schools, believe it or not.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: They,

Professor Floros: I believe it because that's why there's still such a problem.

Professor Perez: Right.

Professor Floros: Cuz it hadn't been part of the curriculum

Professor Perez: For sure. And it's interesting because constantly, like you hear in medical schools, there's been this like shift with the murder of George Floyd. Like they always talk about George Floyd specifically, but what they don't know is that like, unfortunately, like a lot had happened before George Floyd, like way before, like there has been gross violations against the Black community at the hands of police, right?

And so it's interesting for them to kind of take that moment and be like, okay, like we need to look inward and see how we can, and it was actually demanded by students. So it was kind of this like bottom up of students being like, "Hey, like this is happening in our society, it's messed up. And we want our institutions to be held accountable to include these topics in our curricula and be more anti-racist" essentially.

Like you hear a lot of conversations around anti-racism. When I got to the medical school or to the College of Medicine, and as a sociologist, I was really critical because anti-racism is great. Like I think that's the goal, but I wondered, do they know what the racism part is to be able to do the anti-part, right?

Professor Floros: Interesting. Okay.

Professor Perez: And so my class that I offered was really focused on like, how do we unpack what race means in the context of medical education, right? And so a lot of times the way that historically race has been taught, it hasn't. Like the, the, the R word is not used, right? Instead, we talk about cultural competency. We talk about being culturally dexterous. It's always about culture, right?

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: And culture and race are two different things, right? And it's really important to understand how they're different. And so with my class, I was inviting students to, to kind of take this journey with me and to be critical of how medical institutions are racist. And what does it mean to kind of look at this from a socio-historical lens, right? This is entrenched. It didn't just happen in 2020, right? It's been way before. And so then how do we understand that context? But then how do we move forward? How do we become better physicians to serve communities of color and underserved communities?

So, yeah. There's a lot of work to be done, uh, which makes it really exciting to be a sociologist in that context because they are so far behind.

Professor Floros: Yeah.

Professor Perez: But at the same time, I feel like it just creates so much room for contributions.

Professor Floros: Can we just spend a little bit, bit of time talking about how medical schools are racist and how that's been perpetuated over time?

Professor Perez: Yeah.

Professor Floros: I mean, because you hear all these, you know, like the Tuskegee syphilis study and different types of experimentation with Black women and, and things like that, right? So, is it beyond kind of the pre-IRB about how you treat subjects? Or is, it seems like it's more systemic than that?

Professor Perez: Yeah, I think it really is more systemic than that. Like if we take it back to like the beginning of like the 20th century with the eugenics movement, right? Like we were associating differences by race, right?

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: And so I think when we take it back again, historically, we can understand how we got to where we are now, right, with Tuskegee and with forced sterilizations of woman of color and all these other experiments, those were allowed. One, because for sure IRB was built differently. That's one, a policy, but I think it comes from this historical context where it was framed as if these people are disposable, right?

Professor Floros: Right.

Professor Perez: We can experiment on them because we have framed them and deemed them as disposable, and so therefore we can just do what we want in the name of science, right? And so I think

that one is like extremely problematic and it's even more problematic if we kind of just overlook it and pretend it never happened because then we won't understand like why certain communities are hesitant, right? When the Covid vaccine came out, certain communities were hesitant because, well, this is a new vaccine, and if historically, historically we look at Black communities, well, they haven't trusted the medical community, right? And that's fair.

Professor Floros: Yeah. Yeah.

Professor Perez: So yeah, I think that definitely there is a long history of communities of color kind of being disposable and at the hands of medical institutions to, to advance science. But at what cost?

Professor Floros: Yeah. And just for those following along at home, IRB is the Institutional Review Board and any kind of research that involves human subjects, it has to be approved through your institution's IRB before you are allowed to conduct that research to ensure that it is ethical. And that is not only just on medical, the medical side, but it's also if you're gonna do interviews and, and things like that in a social science context.

And so does this extend to things like, my current thing is I recently was unofficially diagnosed with ADHD, and in reading about it more, the different ways that ADHD presents in boys and girls leads to a severe underdiagnosis of girls in school because they're not bouncing off the walls and things like that.

And so, the way that the medical profession approached ADHD for a really long time and continues in some ways today is, you know, you can't have ADHD 'cuz you're not an adolescent boy kind of thing. Are there things like that where historically excluded groups present differently, but because the norm has been, you know, white people, that things are missed or misdiagnosed or things like that?

Professor Perez: Yeah, I think a good example of that would be how like biological differences are reified by race. So, what I mean by that is historically, it was assumed that Black folks had higher pain tolerance. And so what that would mean is that doctors would not prescribe them the right medications for pain tolerance, right?

Cuz there was these gross stereotypes around pain tolerance. And so a lot of times, again, this is like historically rooted where, uh, these differences are reified by like biology and race, and even in your case, gender with the ADHD example, right? And so, because of that assumption, that stereotype, we don't get the proper kind of, they're not served properly, right, and they're in pain at much higher rates, but they're overlooked because suddenly, you have a higher pain tolerance because you're Black. Well, that makes no sense, because that's not true, right?

Professor Floros: Well, and isn't there also then the assumption that, well, you're not really in pain, you're drug seeking, and that also folds into stereotypes of drug behavior and Black communities, et cetera, et cetera.

Professor Perez: Exactly. Yeah. It's definitely compounding for sure.

Professor Floros: Yeah, Okay. Now your research is looking at not necessarily... Actually, before we go there, you use in, in your research the terms "racialized" and "minoritized," um, instead of like racial minority. Can you explain the difference between that language and why you prefer one to the other?

Professor Perez: Yeah, so racialization comes from the theory of racial formation. So Omi and Winant created racial formation many, many years ago, and they're kind of like the, the founding fathers of that theory. And so racial formation says through racial formation comes racialization. So the ways that things become racialized, is through processes, right?

So it's not just that you are of a certain race, but like certain processes and organizations become racialized. And so one article that's pretty new in medical education is looking at how medical schools are racialized. So what does that mean? How can a medical school be racialized? Right? It's not a thing that has a race, but it is an institution that is racialized, right? It's an organization. And so in that study it's looking at how the organization maintains racial inequalities, right, through policies, through guidelines that they have. And so it works to kind of maintain racial inequality.

We have people that essentially benefit from those institutions and people who don't. And so what, in racialization, there's a constant process. You don't choose to be racialized. You're racialized by others

Professor Floros: because race is not a thing.

Professor Perez: Right? It's a social construction.

Professor Floros: Right. We've made it a thing, but it's not a naturally occurring thing.

Professor Perez: Exactly.

Professor Floros: Okay. So rather than looking at racialized patients, you are looking at the medical students and residents who are members of historically excluded groups and what contributes to their success in completing medical programs, right, because there is, um, a huge discrepancy between the enrollment in medical school and those groups' representation in the population at large.

Professor Perez: Yeah, for sure. And it's really unique at the UIC School of Medicine, or the College of Medicine, I should say. I believe we have the largest number of first-generation medical students, meaning that their parents didn't go to medical school. So if your parents went to medical school, you're considered a legacy. Uh, similarly, like if you go to Harvard and your parents went to Harvard, and so, um, UIC is truly high in representation in terms of like students that are first in their families to go to medical school, which is like pretty neat to be in that context. And so essentially the way that I kind of translated my training and my research to medical education was to kind of look at the transitions to and through medical school and using this, uh, very much like sociologically informed theory related to like inequalities, um, structures, barriers.

Specifically, what I'm doing now is applying the community cultural wealth model developed by Tara Yosso, who was my professor at UC, Santa Barbara, uh, back in the day. And I'm kind of taking her framework and putting it into these transitions to and through medical school, because what I've seen is that no one's really talking about that yet in medical school and how it works for students from underserved communities. And the framework, however, has been extensively used in higher ed. So we know how it works in higher ed. We know that students of color have a lot of, uh, community cultural wealth that kind of like propels them to resist kind of these structures of oppression and to then be successful in finishing their, their studies, right? And so I wanna know kind of how these different forms of community cultural wealth are activated among medical students and residents and to see what parts of it are more informative of their experiences as being, you know, future physicians who most often wanna serve, um, in the communities that they come from, right, to, to kind of offer that culturally concordant healthcare, that they didn't grow up with.

Professor Floros: Right. And you contrast this community cultural wealth framework with the more traditional framework that focuses on deficits.

Professor Perez: Mm-hmm.

Professor Floros: Is that right? Okay. I'm using words; I'm not sure I understand them. So can you, um, can you explain what researching from that perspective looks like and how different what you're looking at is from what, what is typical?

Professor Perez: Yeah, for sure. So the community cultural wealth model is anti-deficit, and it comes from this string of research from critical race theory. So the traditional way to understand social and cultural capital is from a very like white middle class standpoint.

Professor Floros: This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

We'll be back with UIC Professor Nicole Perez.

Transition Music: The Sheriff is in Town by Adam Saban

Professor Floros: This is The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros and I'm speaking with Professor Nicole Perez, a sociologist in the Department of Medical Education at UIC.

Can we just rewind for a second and do like a basic Sociology 101? My friend who's a sociology professor is gonna yell at me for needing to do this, but can you talk about what you mean when you talk about social and cultural capital, yes?

Professor Perez: Yeah, of course. Social capital is mostly found in relationships. So like who's in your network? Who you know, where you live, what access to the social capital do you have, right, is determined by the context that you're in and these relationships. Um, so that, that's social capital. So obviously folks who are seen as having high levels of social capital would be those that have access to, if you think of the term, I know people in high places, right?

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: It's not like, it's not what you know, it's who you know,

Professor Floros: Right.

Professor Perez: That's kinda social capital, right?

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: And so historically, certain communities we're deemed to have higher levels of social capital. Another sociological term, if I, if I can, uh, use it here, is homophily, right? Birds of a feather flock together.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: So this homophily then has this like interesting relationship with social capital. So if you hang out with people like yourself, then that kind of capital and the advantages that are accrued through the capital stay within your network.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: And so what does that mean for inequality, right? And what does that mean for neighborhoods and communities and segregation, right? Like we can take it, yeah, way down to, to think about it more historically. So cultural capital, it's more about like, like traditionally it was like, do your parents take you to museums? Do you go to these highbrow kind of activities, right? Because it was through these activities and through this exposure that you were quote unquote gaining culture, right?

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: And so again, it was very based on class, right?

Professor Floros: Sure.

Professor Perez: Based on access to like who can afford, who has time to go to the museum, right? And so that was the more kind of like traditional, again, based on like middle- and higher-class folks and incomes that it was kind of where the bar was set, right?

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: Annette Lareau has a great kind of line of research that looks at how social and cultural capital works and like child rearing and what it means for like inequality in education. So I would definitely recommend her work.

Professor Floros: Okay. And so traditionally, this idea of social and cultural capital and where someone would fall on the spectrum of how much or how little, the measurements are skewed to favor middle- and upper-middle class and wealthy folks who, because of all of the institutionalized racism, tended to be much more likely to be white than from these other groups. Okay. And so this deficit model is saying that, or is it saying that that underserved communities have, they start at this deficit because they don't have these powerful networks or

Professor Perez: mm-hmm.

Professor Floros: access to museums. And so without that, they're going to perform poorly in an educational context.

Professor Perez: Yeah. That's part of it for sure. Yeah. And so what community cultural wealth is saying is, that's wrong. Like communities of color actually have a lot of culture, this cultural wealth, right? But it has historically been overlooked, right? Because if you traditionally view social capital as having connections to people in high places, and you view cultural capital as like going to the museum, well, if you're a Latinx young person, and you're not doing those things, but you're doing other things like you have familial capital, you have aspirational capital, and these other forms of capital that have been overlooked because they don't fit in these like middle and upper class understandings of social, cultural capital, then institutions don't value it the same way.

Professor Floros: Is this partially about applications to, uh, university or medical school or whatever that, that the experience that I might have as, you know, whatever being, uh, something in my church might not be valued as much as the person who runs the youth, whatever group at, or, you know, tutoring program at school or something.

Professor Perez: Yeah, for sure. And so in many medical schools, they're kind of moving toward this holistic approach to admissions, holistic review.

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: So rather than, you know, looking at their MCAT score and judging them based on these like quantitative measures, the holistic review is looking at them as a whole person, right? Like, where is this person coming from? Who are they? And so in a lot of ways, community cultural wealth can be this like framework to better inform this holistic review, right? And so the community cultural wealth has six kind of different arms. So it's like the aspirational capital, the familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, resistant and linguistic.

And so if we get an applicant who's bilingual and they grew up in Little Village, but they had to work through college to kind of pay their, their schooling, um, but they wanna go to medical school. Well, why don't we look at this applicant? Rather than using a deficit approach, let's use this anti-deficit approach and say like, wow, this person has a lot of linguistic capital because they're bilingual, they're gonna be able to work in communities and speak Spanish to populations who haven't had that access before, right? And so it's looking at the strengths that they come with, right, that have, again, historically been overlooked because it was viewed through the lens of traditional forms of social and cultural capital.

So I think there's a lot of room for opportunities in how this can be used.

Professor Floros: What you were saying is making me think of the case in front of the Supreme Court about affirmative action and what would replace it to ensure diversity. Would the community cultural wealth model, applied to admissions, would this model help schools that are trying to diversify to do that if they, if they took seriously these types of capital that, that you're looking at?

Professor Perez: Yeah, and I think that's the key word, like take it seriously. So one thing is to read an application and identify different forms of capital, but the other step is to understand the value attributed to it, right? And so I think that's the, where it's gonna take a lot of work.

Professor Floros: Okay.

Professor Perez: To convince people in power and in leadership to understand the value attributed to these different forms of capital, right? Because oftentimes, unfortunately, like those in power and in higher leadership positions, they're less diverse than perhaps the applicant pool, right?

Professor Floros: Sure.

Professor Perez: That manifests in a way where inequality is reproduced, whether it is intentional or not, right, whether it's by design or not. And so the more that we can kind of use this framework, but also attribute value to it, then that's I think where like the real opportunities for creating a more diverse student body, um, could happen. For sure. Yeah.

Professor Floros: Can you explain a little bit what some of these are? So aspirational capital, what, what would that entail?

Professor Perez: So it's basically students that have aspirations. So if a youth has aspirations to go to college, or they have aspirations to be a doctor one day. It's mostly aspirations tied to like educational attainment and kind of like the careers that they envision for themselves. So it's kind of this like, future forward looking mentality of having consistently high aspirations, right? We see that a lot in the literature where when we look at the discrepancy between aspirations and like retention rates, but also like graduation rates, there's like a huge discrepancy. Like everyone says they wanna go to college, but when you look at kind of the transition to college and even the college completion rates, like those percentages are so far off, right?

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: Um, but I think that aspirations still matter and they're validated, right? Because it's good to have this like, again, future oriented kind of mentality of like what your opportunities are.

Professor Floros: And would that be the difference between “I want to go to college” and “I cannot imagine my future without having attained a college degree, and I will do this”? You know, like, is it kind of a, like, that kind of difference is, is what would differentiate just the “I wanna go to college” from the person who has high levels of aspirational capital.

Professor Perez: Yeah. So it's kind of this like you're maintaining your hopes and your dreams, even though like you have real perceived and like real barriers, right? Like, you know, that it's going to be really tough to fund your education. But despite knowing these like barriers and these structural kind of, um, impediments, the resiliency with the aspirations together kind of support the individual to, to kind of like propel forward, I guess.

Professor Floros: Okay. What is familial capital?

Professor Perez: So familial capital refers to like the cultural knowledge that is rooted in families. For example, in Latinx, and even like other cultures, we have this thing called Familismo which means that the family unit is super important and sometimes the processes in the family supersede the individual. And so a lot of times this familial capital is very tight knit and supportive.

So when you are going through systems of oppression and things like that, you kind of can lean back on your family as a source of support because you have each other and it's not even just like, your parents and your siblings. It's like the extended kind of kin, right? Like your grandparents, your cousins, and kind of looking at this extended family and how there's so much strength and sources of support through that kind of like institution.

Professor Floros: Okay, what is resistant capital?

Professor Perez: Yeah, so resistant capital is kind of looking at how do we resist these structures and how can we challenge this inequality? Right. Okay. It's very much rooted in the legacy of resistance that communities of color have been engaged with, right, historically. So there's been examples of, you know, just looking at how, for example, women of color have had to not only fight or resist patriarchy, but looking at like, if you're a woman of color, well there's patriarchy. What does that look like in the Black community versus the Latinx community? So it's kind of resisting these like multiple

layers of inequality and intersectional layers of inequality, inequality and resisting oppression basically.

Professor Floros: Okay. And navigational capital?

Professor Perez: Yeah. So in terms of like my own research, I think navigational capital is, I wouldn't say the most interesting, but I guess like the most intriguing to me, I would say, because it looks at how folks maneuver their way through social institutions, right. You know, I started this podcast talking about my own transition to college and how like stressful that was. Well that's a source of navigational capital. I wasn't told how to do things, and my parents didn't go to college, so I had to kind of piecemeal different things together, kind of haphazardly, right?

Like it, it wasn't neatly aligned for me, and it was through this navigational capital that I could see my way through, even though it was messy and complicated, right? I had kind of this resourcefulness, again, resiliency to kind of understand that the system wasn't necessarily like built for students like myself.

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: And so that means that I have to navigate it differently because I don't have the same access to resources and information.

Professor Floros: Yeah. I guess, yes. That sounds very interesting. I think what's kind of cycling through my brain is two things. One is, you know, you mentioned how important mentorship was to you in, in your journey, but given that the academy, and as you said, upper levels of, of jobs and, you know, whatever, tend to be predominantly white still, and so how does, like for myself, what can I do to ease the path of students who face, you know, like, how can I be a support to, to these folks? And then the other thing is, what as an institution do we need to do to better appreciate these different forms of capital and to make it so that you don't need high levels of navigational capital to be able to make it through.

I mean, I guess that's what your research is trying to, to figure out. But as someone like walking through it right now as like, I wanna be more helpful, it's a little bit challenging to know what to do.

Professor Perez: Yeah, I think as a faculty member, um, and this came up in like research from my past postdoc, uh, where we tried to kind of disentangle kind of this like help seeking concept and so we found that students are willing to ask for help, but a lot of times they don't know like where to go, and I think that it's as simple as like looking at your syllabus and how you talk about resources and how you even, you know, make that available to students to know, for them to know that, for example, if they can't afford the books that you're assigning, well maybe there's a way that you can get, get it to them for free, right?

Knowing that they can go to your office hours. A lot of students don't know, like they feel really intimidated to go to office hours.

Professor Floros: Yeah.

Professor Perez: And so maybe there's something where, bring a friend, so like you don't have to come by yourself type of thing. Because for me, or from what I've seen is there's uh, kind of like a big barrier between students and faculty and it's both like on, on both sides for different reasons.

And so I think that, students who successfully had good experiences and stories about their faculty were the ones who said, this professor told me about the food pantry. This professor walked me to the food pantry, right, and so it's kind of this like ethics of care, right. And I understand that like as faculty we're pulled in a lot of different directions. We have a lot of time constraints, but just as simple as being like, if there's a deadline and the student can't meet it because he worked all night long, well, being understanding and putting, having empathy for that student, right? It's not because they don't care about your class or they're lazy. It's like taking a step back and being like, okay, like what is the lived experience and where is a student coming from and have, and just caring, you know? Um, I think that goes a long way.

Professor Floros: Yeah, I just, I think that, I don't know how to make that message stronger. Right? Because I think there are a lot of people who are perfectly content to be set in their ways and not think differently. And I don't know how one really hammers home how important, something like empathy and flexible deadlines or something like that is for success, and I'm not sure that faculty are given the resources to understand that either.

Professor Perez: Correct.

Professor Floros: You know?

Professor Perez: Yeah. So I think faculty could very much benefit from like a short orientation session, especially if you teach first-year students. Cuz again, going back to my point about like the first year is the most critical, right? How can we really work toward retaining our students at UIC and other institutions? And so if there's this one-hour orientation that kind of helps faculty break their old ways, right? Like you said, and kind of hammer home this message that they're coming from high school where it's so different, right?

Professor Floros: Yeah.

Professor Perez: And UIC is a really big commuter school. So like what does that mean for students in how they navigate campus, right? Like how do they find their classes? Like that's pretty stressful. And so I think as especially faculty who like are older, like they're so far removed from that, that like they don't even consider it, right?

Professor Floros: Mm-hmm.

Professor Perez: And so I think that could be a good kind of first step is to, to provide that like one-hour kind of faculty orientation for them to know what the resources are. But then also to kind of like present this like broad kind of, um, ethics of caring and like empathy kind of approach to fostering success.

Professor Floros: Now we just have to figure out who's gonna create that one hour,

Professor Perez: Where to get the money.

Professor Floros: Yeah, where to get the money for it. Yeah, man, that's, that stinks. Um, okay, is there anything that you wanna share that I haven't asked about? Like, is there any project that you're working on or you know, result that you found through previous research or stories you've heard from students that, that you wanna share.

Professor Perez: Yeah. Um, I will say that the most fruitful experience that I've had so far in my new role in the Department of Medical Education was teaching the race class in um, that space because I felt so validated in that space because I had a lot of imposter syndrome for sure when I first got there 'cause I was like, what could I really do as a sociologist in, in this space? Right? Like, suddenly I'm in the College of Medicine. Like, like why, you know? But it was through that class where I, I quickly was able to see like, this is my "why" and this is where I'm gonna move the needle and how we can better equip, um, these physicians to understand these concepts. Right? So that was like super fulfilling and validating.

Professor Floros: Well, I wanna thank you so much for your time. Professor Nicole Perez, thank you for being a guest in The Politics Classroom today.

Professor Perez: Yeah, thank you for having me.

Professor Floros: Professor Nicole A. Perez is a Bridge to Faculty scholar in the Department of Medical Education at the University of Illinois Chicago. She will transition to the tenure track in Fall 2023.

You've been listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and you can find me on Twitter and TikTok @DrFloros. If you have ideas for topics or guests you'd like to see featured on the podcast, I've added a comment section to the homepage of the podcast website, thepoliticsclassroom.org. You can also let me know what you like about the show.

Also, don't forget to check out The Bookshelf, the area of the website where you can find links to people and ideas I discuss with my guests. You can find that section at thepoliticsclassroom.org/the-bookshelf. Next time I create a website, I'll try to make it easier.

Regular listeners know that the faculty union at UIC is negotiating a contract with management, and we've reached a critical juncture. A strike date has been set for Tuesday, January 17. I hope it doesn't come to a strike, but currently we're far apart on a few key issues. If we do strike, I'll try to record the podcast from the picket line. If we avoid a strike, I'll probably take next week off and catch up on all the sleep I've missed during bargaining.

Wherever you may be in the world, the next time you see a teacher or professor, thank them for the work they do to help their students achieve their dreams. I hope you are all well and stay safe until I'm back in your ears.

For this week, that's all I've got.

Class dismissed.

Intro & Outro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age