The Politics Classroom

Episode 2021.11: The Secrets of Student Success
Guest: Professor Jay Phelan (UCLA)

[00:00:00] **Professor Floros:** Welcome to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Kate Floros, a faculty member in the Political Science Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Today, I'll be switching gears from my typical political topics, and instead focus on the experiences of students, particularly first-generation students, and what faculty can do to help those students succeed in college. So, let's get started in The Politics Classroom, recorded on November 3, 2021.

Intro Music

Welcome back to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. You can find other podcasts, blogs, and the live DJ schedule at uicradio.org. I'm Professor Floros, and you can find me on Twitter @DrFloros. Today, I'm excited to welcome Professor Jay Phelan into The Classroom. Professor Phelan received his bachelor's degree in biology from the University of California, Los Angeles, better known as UCLA. He then earned his master's degree in environmental studies from the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University, before earning a PhD from the Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology from Harvard University. Professor Phelan taught at Pepperdine University before arriving at his current position as a professor in the Life Sciences Core Program at UCLA, specializing in evolutionary biology, human behavior, and genetics.

He is the author of many academic articles as well as a general undergraduate biology textbook for non-science students. In addition to being the co-author of a book on genetics, he is the co-author of a forthcoming book, The Secret Syllabus: A Guide to the Unwritten Rules of College Success, which will form the basis of much of what we talk about today.

Professor Jay Phelan, welcome to The Politics Classroom.

[00:02:29] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Thank you, Kate. It's great to be here.

[00:02:31] **Professor Floros:** So, I know you were a first-generation college student, which I'd like to talk about in more detail in just a minute, but before we get to that conversation, can you tell us briefly why you decided to pursue a career in biology and how you decided to become a professor?

[00:02:47] **Professor Jay Phelan:** When I went into college, I really had no plan or no goal. I had a high school biology teacher I liked, and I thought, alright, I'll try that out. And as I progressed through UCLA, I realized that I loved learning about the world. How do things work? Why do things happen? What's the cause-and-effect relationship? Things like that. So, I kept pursuing that, and did this all the way through graduate school, a lot of research, and so on, and it was, as I was like a teaching assistant, and then initially as a professor, I started to realize that not only did I love learning about this stuff in the world, how do things work, but then I liked explaining it to other people.

I got so excited about things like, you know, silly things, but the scientific thinking helps us learn. For instance, you know, if you shave hair or cut it, does it grow back thicker and darker? We know the answer. We can figure it out. Or why does caffeine have the effect that it has? Or, I don't know, are GMOs bad? Why is the weather milder at the coast? I realized that in biology and in teaching in general, I would have the opportunity to just kind of pursue interesting questions and then try and

get better and reach a broader audience at explaining these things to, you know, make people happier.

[00:04:08] **Professor Floros:** Did you just keep going to more school because you liked it or you thought, okay, I want to become a professor.

[00:04:15] **Professor Jay Phelan:** I didn't even think that I wanted to become a professor. And I didn't even realize that it was sort of a job that you could teach and write about science until pretty late in the game. I, I had this very simplistic sort of philosophy though, that, I think, was good.

It was that I wasn't going to commit to anything that I wasn't pretty sure that I wanted to pursue, but that I was going to always move towards the things that I liked, the things that gave me intellectual satisfaction or just pleasure. So, I just kept doing that and kept doing that, and it felt weird through a lot of my graduate school where everyone had very specific ideas of what they wanted to do, and I thought, I just like learning stuff. I like getting better at explaining things, but that allowed me then to not have committed to something until I realized, A, what I was going to be able to do and B, that there were opportunities out there that I would have been unaware of as a high school student or even, even a college student.

[00:05:13] **Professor Floros:** Sure. When did you first think that going to college was a realistic option for you? And what was your support system like at home?

[00:05:23] **Professor Jay Phelan:** That's a good question because my parents hadn't gone to college and almost none of my relatives had gone to college. Growing up, we, we were, we were pretty poor. So, my parents had enough understanding that they thought you want to get a head start on, on getting a good outcome, so going to college is going to be essential. They didn't really know what that meant. They didn't even know sort of what the options were or how to consider things. I remember at first thinking to myself, oh, well, I do well in high school. I should, I was in Northern California. I should go to Stanford. Like, smart kids go there.

And I remember my parents telling me, no, you can't apply there. I said, well, why not? They said, well, because you'll get in and then we can't afford it, and then we'll have to say no, and you'll get mad at us. So no, that's out. You can go to a University of California because we'll figure out a way to pay for that. So, there was on the one hand, a sense, of course you're going to college, and on the other hand, we don't really know what that means, but we think there's a good value here. So, do that.

[00:06:29] **Professor Floros:** Interesting. Your forthcoming book is called The Secret Syllabus: A Guide to the Unwritten Rules of College Success, and it will be released in 2022.

So, what is the Secret Syllabus?

[00:06:44] **Professor Jay Phelan:** When I was a graduate student, I became very close friends with someone, Terry Burnham, and he's an economics professor, and he's my co-author on this book and on another book. And he and I would spend hours and hours talking about our experiences, and as teaching assistants, that we would meet these students and they clearly wanted something. They wanted a recommendation letter, or they wanted advice, or they wanted a research position, or they just, they needed something, and they would come to us and we were in a position to help them. But they would do things that were, that were just exactly the wrong thing to do. They would write an

email that was almost offensively informal, or poorly thought through. Just, hey prof, I know I should probably get a research experience, do you have anything that I could do? (Floros laughs)

And I thought, wow, that was your one shot, and I might have them, but you've conveyed to me all sorts of things about how you're going to be in that, that position. So, what Terry and I started thinking was, wow, it's not that students are bad. It's not that they are, are clueless. It's that in many cases, they just don't know what to do. And increasingly, we would document, so this is started, this is like 25 years ago, we started documenting the emails they would send that were not going to set them up for success. The different areas of college that they were getting worse outcomes than they, they could get.

And as we, we wrote them down, we thought, boy, we have to, we have to help people. We should try to explain these things, because in many cases, it's just that no one ever told you that this is what you should do. No one ever told you that here's the way to approach this. No one ever told you about office hours, for instance.

You just assume everyone's like, well, you got to go to office hours, but no one ever says why, and that advice is not enough. I'm like, okay, but I already understand the material maybe, or I can look at the book, or I can talk to my TA, or I can watch a video of the class or something like that. No one ever explained to me, hey, guess what? This is the one aspect of college where you control the agenda. So, when you go in there, you can ask your professor anything you want and asking them to just re-explain the material, that's not even a very good use of that time where you control the agenda.

Why not say, hey, if you were a student in this class, how would you spend your time? Or, if you could change the way students are, what would it be? Or, from your perspective, what are the elements of an ideal exam question? Or how do you prepare a lecture? Like, what's your process? And all these things allow you to, to get a window into your instructors that isn't available anywhere else.

So, it's, it's the, the most valuable use you can get from that time. And in the process, you're doing other things, not only learning about them and about potential careers and how to do better in college, but you are, you're starting the first steps even of a professional relationship with someone who's in a position to be a mentor or to help you out in some other way.

[00:09:54] **Professor Floros:** Yeah, I remember I had a student who, very bright student, I think he got some kind of postgraduate fellowship, like really high achieving, but he would come during office hours, which we have been asked to rename student hours so they know that it's for them and not for us, but he would come to student hours and he would just sit there and look at me. Like, he was putting in his time, but he didn't have, like, an agenda or a topic list or whatever. And it was very painful 'cause I didn't want to be like, if you've got nothing, go away, but, you know, he could have much better used that time. So, that's a really interesting point.

[00:10:30] **Professor Jay Phelan:** I have a, I have a lot of students who will have similar things. Like they've got a little checkbox on their, their daily planner. Oh yeah, I got to go to office hours, and they'll sit there without any interaction. And you can contrast this with, there are some other students who have come to my office hours, and they'll all say, okay, what do you want to get out of office hours today? And they'll say, I don't have any questions today. I just wanted to maybe come and listen. I've never been to office hours. I'm not even really sure what to do. As soon as they say that that's a, that's a completely different interaction than the student who comes and is passive, like a bump on a log. So, just making that little switch, making yourself a little vulnerable can turn it into a great experience.

And in fact, I know in a lot of recommendation letters that I've written over the years, I'll talk about the growth that I've seen in a student from day one to later. And I can even say that, hey, when they first came, they, they wanted to interact at office hours. They didn't even know what to do. And now I look at how mature they've come or thoughtful or whatever. And that can convey something. I think that helps them out that, that I, I'm there to see their growth.

[00:11:35] **Professor Floros:** So, you mentioned that you have been taking notes with your co-author for multiple years from the teaching side, but I'm wondering how much of your experience from the student side informs your thinking about the secret syllabus and what you think students need to do to succeed.

[00:11:54] **Professor Jay Phelan:** That's interesting because, yeah, from the teaching side, I see these things that students do and I'm just like, oh no, did you really do that? Did you really say that? But I never felt negatively towards them. There was always sort of an empathy because I was worse than them at anything that they have ever done. I did a much worse version. I just made just some avoidable, and I just think spectacularly terrible, choices. I never went to office hours a single time. I barely went to class, and I think that these, these blunders, they hurt me as a student. But now they help me to, to see that you're terrified about having this interaction. You're terrified that you're going to look dumb. You're terrified that you don't even understand the material enough to ask an intelligent question. So, you, you can become paralyzed.

So, I remember all that well and my response had been because I'm afraid in order to avoid humiliation or some sort of, you know, social disaster, I'm going to avoid it. I'm going to bury my head in the sand and do nothing. So, I think that I can remember very well feeling that way. Sitting in the back of the classroom where I would think to myself, this class is saying nothing to me about my life. And even that memory that I have reminds me now as a teacher, I need to connect this with students' personal experience, or they're going to do just what I'm doing.

Another way that I have gotten, I think, some insights into them from the student perspective is that when I first got to UCLA, as a strategy to help students not feel like a number, to not feel like they never had interaction with faculty, I gave them the opportunity to have lunch with me and group lunches of seven, six or seven students, we would go somewhere after class, we just walk, bring your own lunch, 50 minutes, and the only rule was you can't talk about the class, the course content, we talk about anything else.

The conversations were wide ranging about, about parental pressure, about insecurity relative to your friends in terms of knowing what your, your career path was. All of these things, but we also had fun, you know? What movies do you like? What, what music do you listen to? Do you want to go to graduate school? You know, just strange things. I would ask students, tell me something interesting and irrelevant about yourself. This question was a great question because I would, they're like, well, what do you mean? I say, well, interesting. I get to subjectively decide. I want you, I want you to interest me. Irrelevant means you are never going to put this on your resume and you're never going to mention it in an interview because if you are, then I question it. I think, uh. You've been trained from the time you were a little kid that you do things because they're going to look good on your college application or something like that. So, if you start telling me about some volunteer job you're doing, you might love it, but I want it to be irrelevant. I want it to be some, obsession with some type of anime or some weird collection of things that you have, or I don't know what just, you know, things like that.

And from that, I got a lot of students to open up just revealing things to themselves and I could then get into their mindset. Here's, I'll tell you the most ridiculous thing that comes to mind right now is I'm sitting there, and some students really are talking about deep things about being on their own for the first time. There's one student who never said a word in the class. She said, she said, if you take a tennis racket without the strings in it, I can put my body through it. I thought, I have no response to that, but I love that you said it. That's fantastic. So, uh,

[00:15:45] **Professor Floros:** And so, did that give her more confidence that she could say that, and it was cool, and everybody thought it was awesome and.

[00:15:53] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Exactly, that she saw, hey, this is, you know, that it's like, it's like a, I don't know, an icebreaker that, that then you can talk about other stuff once you've said something. I remember being in small classes as a, as a graduate student that there was this weird thing that until I had spoken in the class, in the discussion, I felt this, this weird marginalization, like I was isolated from everyone else. I wasn't part of the intellectual discourse, But it got progressively harder and harder and harder to say something I needed to have, have gotten in otherwise it would take on too much importance when I finally did so I think about that with these students if they could just say anything because I would then notice in, in subsequent days in the lecture part of the class, it's a class of 300 people, but I'd recognize all these faces, and they would recognize me, and we had a personal bond. So, it turned it into, I think, an interaction where they now had a greater belief that I'm their ally. I'm on their side, that I know some interesting stuff, and I want to teach it to them for purely good reasons, because I think it'll make their life better. They start to understand that.

[00:17:02] **Professor Floros:** So, you're able to have lunch with 300 students over the course of the semester?

[00:17:07] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Well, not everyone wants to go. I have, you know, two to three lunches each week in a 10-week quarter. Usually, I limit it to seven people on the sign-up sheet and I tell them I'll keep doing this as long as people keep signing up. Otherwise, I'm in my office having lonely guy lunch. So, some classes I think I'll, I'll have more than 200 students will come. Other classes, you know, it might, it might be 60 percent of the class or something like that. You're not going to reach everyone all the time, but I think, you know, it's a start. And in some ways for students, just knowing that I'm doing it has an impact on them.

I'll get emails from students years later, or I'll have them in a session, and they'll finally come to office hours, and they'll say, hey, I was in your other class. I never signed up for the lunch because I was nervous or whatever, but I think it was great that you did that. So, it's weird. You can even do something. They don't take part, but it still has a positive benefit.

[00:18:01] **Professor Floros:** Nice. How much of your own experiences do you share with your students? So, not just today life, but your struggles academically before you figured it out and all that.

[00:18:13] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Anytime you're a teacher, you're really weighing the balance of how much about your own life. There's a lot of really good educational research that says self-disclosure is valuable. And the thing is, it's not just self-disclosure, tell them a funny story, that's, that's a random tangent. It's self-disclosure that's relevant to the stuff you're talking about. So, if we're talking about some research study and I tell them about a colossal mistake I made once on a, on a research experiment, or if we're, I'm teaching them something about chromosomes and, like, the chromosomes in humans are numbered one to 23. And I was in graduate school in genetics, and only then did I realize, oh, they number them in decreasing order of size. Number one is the biggest.

Number two is second biggest. Number three is third biggest. And it's obvious when you look at a picture, and I never dawned on me, but I might tell the students this. I couldn't reveal this to any of my professors, but I felt really foolish.

So, I think that self-disclosure can humanize you. They realize that you're struggling. You have successes. You also have some struggles or some failures. And that can be motivating to them. When I first began, I was more insecure than I am now that, how can I be in front of the classroom? How can I be the guy? They're not going to believe anything I say. I don't know enough. I know how little I know. So, I think I was a little bit more formal and reserved because I was so nervous that they feel like I was giving them their money's worth, that I was, I was the authority and I, I worried that too much revelation about myself and my own struggles might diminish what they got from me or even how much they trusted me in the, the material that I was giving them.

Little by little as I did this for more and more years and thought, all right, I'm okay. You know, I, I've had some publishers, let me publish books. So that was, that was a good, you know, somehow validation. And then when teaching a class where I had written the textbook, I thought, I think they're going to believe that I know the material. So, I can, I can tell them a little bit more.

And that was when I finally revealed to a class once that as a student at UCLA, as I'm talking to UCLA students, I said, hey, you may have, have struggled when you, you know, since you've gotten here. I did too. I had trouble going to class. I said, and maybe some of your professors will tell you, yeah, that they struggled. I said, I really struggled. I was on academic probation. I was on subject to dismissal. These are things that happen when you fail classes. But it didn't, it didn't end my academic life. I said it was very bad and I'm not proud of it at all. It doesn't make me feel like, ha ha, I beat the system. I just feel like an idiot. I wasted opportunities because I wasn't properly dedicated to them or whatever. So, I told them this. And when I tell them, hey, I got a bunch of Fs as an undergraduate. In fact, I spaced them out just sufficiently, so I never got kicked out of school. But then I say, you know, I finally, I started thinking. No one's looking out for me except me. I have to figure out how do I study? How do I improve my performance? And I used a more concerted effort to get better. And in the end, being able to first get into a graduate school at Yale and then to get into Harvard for my PhD, which, you know, I don't advise getting poor grades and then trying to do that.

It's, it's hard and it's low probability. And I think there was a, a significant element of good fortune in that happening to me. Nonetheless, when I tell the students, yeah, I got Fs and I got into Harvard for a PhD, nothing resonates with them more of all the things I say in the term than that. That, hey, I identify with that. I've struggled, but I don't think I'm worthless. There's hope, somehow, still. So, so I, I would say now I reveal more than I did previously. But I always try to focus my mind on how can I reveal things that help them to get the better outcome? It still has to be about them. The, the whole classroom experience. It's not for them to think, oh, that was a fun show or that was entertaining. It's for them to be more equipped for the world afterward. And if that requires them knowing silly things I tell my kids or other stuff like that, then, then so be it.

[00:22:50] **Professor Floros:** Yeah. I mean, I've given a lot of thought to this idea about disclosure because I've been diagnosed with depression and I'm under doctor's care for that. And it can really interfere with grading things in a timely manner and things like that. And so, I was like, oh, I don't want to tell them because then they're going to think I'm an idiot. But then I noticed how many students were struggling with mental health themselves. And I thought, well, you know, if I say I'm struggling too, maybe that will help them. And so now at the beginning of the semester, in my syllabus, there's a list of services on campus, including the Counseling Center. And so, I say, Hey, this is me and I don't need to know your business, but if something is getting in the way of you doing the

work, let me help you if I can, kind of thing. And I've had a couple of students say that that has, a student came into my student hours because she's like, if you hadn't said that I never would have come to see you, but I feel like you would understand this, and then told me that she needed an extension.

Let's take a break. I've been speaking with Professor Jay Phelan, a Life Sciences Core Program professor at UCLA, about strategies for first generation college students. This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

Music Interlude

Welcome back to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and you can find me on Twitter @DrFloros. My guest in the classroom today is UCLA Life Sciences Core Program professor and biologist, Jay Phelan

The first chapter of your new book is The Big Picture: Every Culture has Rules and Norms. Some are Written, but Many are Not. To me, because I haven't read an advanced copy of your book, sorry, that you're talking about a culture of higher ed that students may not know. You've given some examples, but what are some of the cultural aspects of college and university that are not written that students may have no clue about?

[00:25:20] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Yeah, I, I first read this description in, in graduate school. I ended up teaching a bunch of anthropology classes. I'd never even taken a anthropology class. So, many of the people that I worked with spent a lot of time in different cultures. So, I started thinking more and more about that. And I read this account of an anthropologist the first time anyone described the phrase culture shock. He was in, he was in South America. It was Brazil somewhere. And he was lecturing to this group of people. They were wives of, of engineers that had been sent by the U. S. to Brazil to work on some international project. And all of the, they were all women, they all found themselves there and were having a hard time adjusting.

So, the anthropologist explained, it might look the same. Here's your room, here's your shower, here's your windows, here are other people, here's the meal that you have. But the, that there can be a culture shock, things that you don't quite see, norms that you don't quite understand when you reach out somewhere to, to shake their hand and that's not what they're expecting and, and the, the, something about that is inappropriate and all that.

I thought that really is what college felt like to me, that it was an alien culture. Superficially, it looked the same. Hey, here's all these people. I know people. Hey, we're all talking. And yeah, I get it. There's the boss, the, the professor, she's, she's in charge, whatever. And I've had bosses before, but the culture differs in that you have content being delivered in classrooms, people telling you all the ins and outs of physics or chemistry and possibly political science. I don't know. I've never had a class,

[00:27:04] **Professor Floros:** For shame!

[00:27:06] **Professor Jay Phelan:** But (laugh) I know I need one, but they have these other unwritten rules and norms about how do you develop a professional relationship, for instance, that nowhere is it written down, here's what you do. Nowhere is it written down that at the end of college and at times in the middle of it, you are going to need people who have some expertise to advocate for you.

So, they're going to have to write you a recommendation. Almost everyone who finishes college needs a recommendation for something.

And in movies, they love to have the scene at the end where someone realizes, oh no, we don't have enough time to do all these things. And so, there's a montage and they pull an all nighter and everything comes together and it all works out. In real life, that, that doesn't work. The problem is that it's like you need a time machine because you cannot have a professional relationship, you can't have a mentor all of a sudden, the minute that you need it. It's something that can't be rushed. You can't rush a, a relationship even. And so, I think what, what people need to think about is, oh yeah, I'm gonna need research experiences. Well, how do I get them? You, rarely do you get them cold. You get them from someone you have some contact with, but nowhere does it say this.

So, I was, we were talking about office hours before, that you go. In many cases, all you're doing is having the first of what's going to be repeated interactions with someone. That's what a friendship is. That's what a mentorship is. Repeated interactions where there is a gradual, mutual getting to know each other. And the problem is that lag time is the enemy because you can't speed this up. If you haven't been doing this from day one, then you're going to be in trouble when all your friends are getting jobs because they mention three times to their teaching assistant that they didn't know what they wanted, but they hoped someday to get research experience or something like that. They don't know this.

So, so, for instance, one of the things was just this idea that you have to have a, what I call a relationship strategy. And it can sound sort of cold and calculating, that first, when you get to school, you're going to think, all right, I'm going to have, let's say if you're on semesters, 5 professors each semester for the year, so 10 professors per year, 40 professors over the course of my, my college career, something like that.

Let's say I need recommendation letters from 3 of them, so it's sort of like 1 out of 10, you know, almost essentially 1 per year. Well, how are you getting that? Well, you've got 10. Out of those 10, you don't have to go to every office hour of every professor, but you have to evaluate. Does this person have skills or features that resonate with me? Might I want to learn more? Do I see her in class and think, wow, I want to be like her. Then you have to go give them a chance, meet them, talk to them. Then later you, you might just send them a note. Hey, thank you so much for X, Y, or Z. But just this slow thing that involves real subtle nurturing of a relationship that there's no set way to do it. But it's absolutely essential if you're going to get the outcomes that you, you should get from college. It's essential that you've done it at some point.

I had an email from a student once, and this is, this is something just kind of a standard thing. It stuck out to me because it was exactly the sort of thing that I never ever would have done, and it would have seemed laughable to do. But she wrote to me, wrote to me after a class. She said, Dr. Phelan, I felt compelled to write to you. Today was the best genetics lecture I've attended all quarter. Thank you. The Chicken Codominance Study, The Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance, A Young T. H. Morgan, and The Raccoon Pick were just a few highlights. I was positively giddy during and after lecture. I eagerly await your next lecture on Friday. Sincerely, Julissa. She didn't ask for anything. She just was saying in a way that felt authentic and kind, hey, this is great. I'm having a good time. I appreciate what you're doing. I wrote back to her, of course I write back to her, and I say, hey, stop by the office hours sometime just to say hi, so I can put a face to a name, and she did that, and then at some point she ended up taking another class that I took, and then she took a small seminar, and later on I started helping her as she tried to figure out, she was in psychology, she wanted to go into some sort of counseling field, and I, I have a lot of students who have done that, I was able to help her.

It started because she and I started meeting because I wrote to her, but I wrote to her because she sent this thing and that's what I mean in terms of a culture that the burden, even though it shouldn't, the burden sort of falls to students to take that first step, especially if you're in a big university or you have large classes, you may have some smaller classes later in your college career, but you might even feel then like it's too late.

So, so you've got this burden on you. That would be the first one. And the same thing goes for your peers. That, in many cases, people in your lab group or in a discussion section, they're not going to reach out to you. Hey, would you like to study together? Hey, we should, we should do this. And, I didn't realize this, and finally, you know, my third year in college, some friend of mine said, hey, we should study together. And I'm like, that's kind of weird. All right. And he did that, and he had come from a family of people who had gone to graduate school and had, had careers. And he, he said, let's just yeah, we will, we'll study from six to 10 p. m. Sunday through Thursday night and halfway through we'll take a break. We'll ride our motorcycles around campus and yeah, just have some fun. So, we started doing this, but then I would reveal to him, I'm like, you know what, I don't really even know what it means to study. What do you do? And he started showing me, hey, well, I do this, I do this. And so, there was this whole world that he had learned from his brothers and sisters. He came from a big family, and they had all this college experience, and passed it on to him.

Well, a lot of people, people like me, first generation students, no one's passing that information on at all that you need to find the people who are in a position to have, you know, mutually beneficial relationships. You need to start the relationships with other people. You need to find research positions, for instance, if you're thinking about that. Uh, you can't just be the invisible person the whole way through, even if that feels safer to you. I didn't know that, and that was the route I was going, and fortunately, you know, was saved by a couple of lucky events.

[00:33:41] **Professor Floros:** I don't remember talking to my parents about their college experiences, but both of my parents went to college, and they were high school teachers, so they also had master's degrees. And I have an older brother and sister who went to college ahead of me. And my older brother also has a PhD, but I don't remember ever sitting down and having a conversation. I'm assuming I still got a ton of what you're talking about without explicitly talking to them about it, but is it just, like, in the air? Like, how did, how did I benefit if I didn't really have a heart-to-heart about study skills or things like that? Like what's, what's the difference between maybe, I mean, obviously you don't know my family, but a person who has family who's gone to college versus someone who hasn't.

[00:34:32] **Professor Jay Phelan:** I think that's at the core of, in many cases, the privileges that people have, and they're not even aware of. You're like, hey, nobody ever told me anything. Except that, in your case, I actually do know everything about your family.

[00:34:48] **Professor Floros:** Oh, fantastic, good.

[00:34:50] **Professor Jay Phelan:** In your case, so I'm going to tell you about, in your case, you hear siblings, discussing interactions that they've had and subconsciously they are conveying to you, oh, students have interactions with professors. Oh, students get things from professors. Oh, students seek advice about things other than the content of the class from their professor So, not the thing they're talking about with you, but you're hearing it. You're like, oh, that's what people do. Oh, students, you know, when they're applying for graduate school, draw on their research job, but also their job at the front desk of the dorm or something else that makes them look like a well-rounded candidate that there, you can, you can spin things in ways that benefit you.

And you were learning that probably from them as they just did these things. Oh, here's my strategy that I'm going to do this. Or your parents, you know, they get a master's degree, and they decide, do I want to go on for a PhD? Do I want to teach high school? If they're teaching high school, they have other options.

They could be teaching at a community college. Why did they decide that? Well, you may be privy to discussions that they have around the dinner table or just hearing them, overhearing them talk with each other about what they're excited about or, or other stuff, or for instance, just in their job, you might hear, what do they like about their job? What do they dislike about their job? And that was framing the world for you of what are my options? What are the things that I'm not going to like? What are the things that I am going to like?

And we didn't have any of that at all. My dad would tell me in later years, he'd get frustrated. He's like, the more school you can get and the better school you can get, the better, independent even of what you learn. He said, I, as I'm rising up through my industry, electric supplies, he said, these guys come in, college guys, and they get hired at levels above me. And I've got all this experience and I understand the business of it. My dad's a smart guy, but he said, they all get, get promoted ahead of me because he's super disciplined, eventually he wins out, but he said, he said, I feel like I have to work twice as hard, or I feel like it takes me twice as long to get the things that I would have gotten if I had gone to college. So, from his perspective, he thought, I don't know anything about being a college student, but I can tell you from the outside world, you're going to be better off in a practical sense if you have these things.

And so, you know, that was enough, but that was all he could tell me that you better, you better not flunk out of college. I remember even, I finished graduate school, and so my parents came to Harvard for what I felt like was the, the, just the best day of my life, and after I get the, the whole PhD hood and all that, my mom says, do you think you could get into medical school now?

And it really brought me down to earth. It was deflating because her intentions were good. She thought this could work out. This could be a good thing. And she didn't understand what it meant to have a PhD. She's like, you know, you have to get a real job. And so, I would contrast that with your experience that I'm growing up and they're great and they're good parents, but I'm growing up in an environment where this whole PhD stuff and putting off getting a job is clever enough, and we know we can't yell at you, but come on, get serious. That's not what, that's not what people do. So, that's exactly what it means to not be "in the bath" that I didn't have at the ready six things that are cool that people do when they go to college or when they study these things that I study that seem like they're not very practical.

So, so it felt like this resistance that it was, it was a folly. It was sort of a vanity project to, to think about what I wanted to think about, and I had them come, I gave a seminar, I was invited to Stanford's Medical School has this program where they're trying to help their professors be better teachers. So I went, and since that's near where my parents live, I said, hey, why don't you come to my talk? And it's just all these medical school professors, but they said yes, so they came, they sat in the back, the organizer of the event thought it was the funniest thing that one of the speakers brings his parents.

But I bring them and they hadn't seen me teach or lecture in, you know, since I was maybe, you know, in graduate school. And they couldn't believe it, that it was like people were listening. People were writing stuff down that it seemed like it was a real thing. And I think only then did they sort of sense like, all right, there, the world values this, even though we don't quite understand how that can be.

So, yeah, so that's this ongoing background that I've always felt where I'm having to discover obvious things about the culture of academics for the first time that no one even thought to teach me because the people who already have them, it's obvious that, well, of course they're not going to do this.

[00:39:51] **Professor Floros:** Yeah.

[00:39:52] **Professor Jay Phelan:** All the things that I write about in the book, The Secret Syllabus, Terry and I have said, these are extremely important for historically underrepresented groups for first generation students. But don't miss the point. Everyone coming to college is still trying to find their, their way. So, they're just varying degrees to which you need to implement these things.

One of the ones I think about is how to study. When do you learn how to study? As far as I know, there was never a class. And my high school was not a great high school, but they certainly didn't teach me, here's what you do to study. And I get to UCLA, and so I'm just kind of looking around in the classroom, and I certainly don't have any siblings or parents that I can say, hey, how am I supposed to study? But I see, oh, they have like highlighters. I should probably do that. Oh, they take notes. All right, I'll do that. But it turns out there's a ton of educational research on learning. Here's what you should do to study. Most of the things that students choose to do are not the most effective or efficient things. So that's something that it doesn't matter, if you're first gen, it doesn't matter anything. If you haven't been taught, here's what's going to be better for you as a student. Whether it's, you know, about, for instance, taking your own notes is infinitely better for learning than having notes.

There's a great paper that I love, and it's called Taking Notes is Better than Having Notes. And they've done these great really well-controlled studies showing that writing down the notes, even when you can't keep up, even when you're scrambling, even when you're writing is terrible, are way better than having the notes in front of you that you can read along with.

Your brain just processes it different. As you're writing it down, you have to decide, how do I put it? What's the hierarchy? How do I indent? And your brain is trying to figure out, where does this fit in with my prior knowledge here? And, and so on. So, you've got all that, then you've got these other things where, where when you are studying after you have your notes and you've recopied them, that you can't just reread the material or re-highlight it, that you have to think about, how am I going to be assessed on this? And you have to rehearse that.

So, I always laugh. I had a student in my class years ago and she was a pole vaulter on UCLA's track team. And I couldn't even, I couldn't even imagine being a pole vaulter because that's scary. But I thought, well, how do you learn to pole vault? And I look and on Amazon, they sell books, how to pole vault. And I, and I thought, well, I'd read a book, how to pole vault. I'd probably watch some YouTube videos as well. But if my grade in a class was going to be determined by how high I could pole vault, I'd probably pole vault a lot. So, so if I have a biology professor, a political science professor who says your exam is going to consist of six short answer, you know, one page questions about whatever topics we've covered, if you haven't spent the majority of your study time writing one page descriptions of the material, but instead you wait and the first time you ever have written an essay for that class, is in the exam, you're not going to do as well as you could. You have to study the way you're going to be assessed. When you hear that, you're like, all right, that makes sense. But no one teaches you that. So, until, until you know that, then you're on your own in a way that we have lots and lots of evidence saying your instincts are not going to be the best ones.

[00:43:20] **Professor Floros:** So, I want to do a lightning round where I am going to tell you my professor pet peeves, and you are going to give me advice about how I can handle my pet peeves such that I am helping students succeed regardless of how annoyed I am. How do you feel about that?

[00:43:38] **Professor Jay Phelan:** All right, let's go. I'll do, I'll do what I can.

[00:43:40] **Professor Floros:** Okay. Number one, students who refer to me as Mrs. Floros, even after I sign emails, Professor Floros.

[00:43:52] **Professor Jay Phelan:** That's a tricky one. And I have, I have decided... it's weird because sometimes I feel like it's my job to teach the world a lesson. On this particular issue, I've decided that I'll get emails to me that just say, Hey Jay, or something like that, and I know their intentions are good. And I know in those cases, I could say, Hey, you know, it might be better, you know, for your future interactions to do this. I've decided on that one, I never address it. I sign, I continue to sign it however I, I will. I don't bring it up. I try to be helpful to them and I figure if we have a, a deeper relationship later, I will mention it, it then, but in my mind, the cost benefit of I'm going to embarrass them and make them feel bad or dumb about something maybe overvalues then, you know, here's someone who is contacting me.

So, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna try to help them. My initial email that I write to them is usually very cold and not, not very nice. And before I send it, I always go back and first line, Hey, I hope you're doing well. And the last line, I hope that you're finding all this stuff in our class to be enjoyable and useful. And I, I try to make it nicer and I'm always surprised if they do write back, even if they still are, Hey Jay, thanks so much, blah, blah, blah, but you see that you can, you can change their attitude a little bit. So, I think my answer is a cowardly, let it go.

[00:45:16] **Professor Floros:** I did, this semester for the first time, I made a video on, Hey, welcome to the profession. This is how you answer emails. So I think it has worked a little bit, but the people who don't watch that video, it has not helped them.

Music interlude

Pet peeve number two, students who ask questions that are clearly answered on the syllabus.

[00:45:45] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Oh my god, I just had an email from someone yesterday. What's, or not yesterday, last week, but they said, is the stuff from week five going to be on the midterm? And here, I'm going to tell you what I do. I don't know if it's the best thing to do, but I say, as it says in the syllabus, page four, see attached, only the stuff from lectures one through nine, which is weeks one to four.

Also, in the first video that I made, Navigating Life Science 15, you'll see it three minutes, 16 seconds in, I say, I'll only ask stuff from the first four weeks of class, and the first four discussion sections on the midterm. But then I went back, and I was like, hey, thanks for writing, blah blah blah, and at the end I said I hope you're studying is going well, and I hope that the class is a good experience for you.

And the student just, I think by having the nice things, the student wrote back to me, and she even came to the following office hours, but in her subsequent email, she said, Thank you for that

information. I'm really sorry that I didn't see the obvious stuff in, in the syllabus. I feel like an idiot, but I appreciate it just the same.

So, it turned from something that we could have had a conflict relationship into something where she owned up to it. I was nicer than maybe I needed to be and, and it worked out. So, it's, it's kind of that middle ground where I don't want to alienate anyone, but I did have to teach her a lesson.

[00:47:04] **Professor Floros:** So, you did, you like laid it all out, but you were super nice at the beginning and at the end and it softened the blow.

[00:47:11] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Yes. But in, but in the middle, I mentioned three separate places where I had indicated the answer to that question.

[00:47:17] **Professor Floros:** Nice.

Music Interlude

Pet peeve number three, having an assignment sheet that details explicitly what information I am looking for in the assignment and students turning in assignments that have nothing to do with the explicit instructions provided.

[00:47:43] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Yeah, that's, that's like right at the core of my book, The Secret Syllabus, that there are, there are some easy, obvious things that students can do to get a better outcome, and right near the top is pay attention to what your professors are saying to you. They've thought about this a lot. And their interests are aligned with yours. So, on those, I would give them a worse score than they would get. And I'd say the stuff you include here is really good. Unfortunately, I can't give you a 30 because I have a lot of students who answered the specific questions or satisfied the various elements in the rubric that you haven't.

And I'll usually say, how would you feel if you were one of those students and you saw this one who didn't do it got the same score? I feel like I'd be sending a weird message to them. I still like what you did, and there's still time in this class. Remember, we drop your lowest score, so this doesn't have to harm you at all, but as a very basic level, answering every single question or completing every request is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a perfect performance.

So, I'll say that. I'll praise what they've done. I'll make the appeal to, you put me in a tough spot because there are people who did it and got all the points. How would they feel if they, if I post on the website, here's what I'm giving this person? I'd feel like that would not be what they would expect from me.

Music Interlude

[00:49:18] **Professor Floros:** Number four, requiring citations, writing in five separate places that citations are required, and students not including citations because they didn't know how to do it.

[00:49:32] **Professor Jay Phelan:** You're such a mean professor.

[00:49:34] **Professor Floros:** I'm not mean, I'm trying, that's why I'm asking, I want to be better. I don't, I'm

[00:49:38] **Professor Jay Phelan:** I know. No, you can't feel terrible because this is the low stakes situation for them to learn the lesson. And if they get a perfect score on their paper, not having done the thing they're required to do, it's not that you haven't taught them the lesson that you have to follow instructions in your job and in your marriage and in your friendships. It's not that you haven't taught them that lesson, you have actively taught them the other lesson, that you can still get full credit without doing what people ask.

So, you know, it's like when you're raising your kids, that everything that you do, if they do the wrong thing or they do the right thing, you're teaching them a lesson one way or another. But it might be the, not the lesson you want. So, I think I do the same thing as in the previous question. I would deduct from their score.

I'd say, hey, this is necessary. This is how people do this in the field. And I tried to be as clear as I could in indicating what it was. I'm sorry that you, you were held back by the fact that you, you didn't know how to do it, but in the future, you got to talk to your teaching assistant, or you have to come talk to me ahead of time, cause that's a solvable problem. But I think you can't send them the message that they can still get full credit. Oh, well, I told her, I yelled at her, and I gave her full credit. If that's it, then it's la la la la la. Do whatever you want and you can win. Yeah, you're not, you're not helping them.

[00:50:57] **Professor Floros:** This semester, I usually have them write three memos and the first memo is always a disaster because they don't follow instructions, they don't cite and it's, it's terrible and it sets a terrible mood for the rest of the semester.

So, this semester, number one, you get a grade, but it's not recorded. So, if you did well, turn it in again, you get that grade. If you did horribly, now you should know better all the things you did wrong. Rewrite it, and then that's the grade you get. So, we just got the rewrites on Monday, so hopefully that was a good strategy.

[00:51:33] **Professor Jay Phelan:** I think, I think that's a great strategy. And I think you're, you're actually probably nicer than me because I, I've done that on some exams and I think it's good anytime you have someone revisit an exam, it's like revising a paper. It makes it a much more effective learning experience. I always say that you can get half of the distance between your score and full credit based on what you do. So if you do a perfect revision, you're still only halfway there. Otherwise, there's no incentive for their, their first effort. They think, well, just throw something down and then they'll tell me what I have to do. So I, I want there to be a little bit of a cost, but it's still, it's a great thing.

And it's something that until a couple, maybe a year or two ago, I had never done that. I, and, and if you have the assignment and there's no benefit for the students to revisit it and learn from it, then they don't, so, it's great. Like, it's really, I think, a clever and thoughtful way. If you can get them to work with each other on those two, so that they're talking to each other about it, I like that also. They, they sometimes believe their peers more than they believe you about how hard or easy something is or, or where they should figure out, find the instructions how to do it.

[00:52:49] **Professor Floros:** Thank you for the affirmation. I appreciate it. Your students must love you.

Music Interlude

Final pet peeve, a student who goes radio silent until the last two weeks of the semester and then hopes they can make up everything they missed.

[00:53:11] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Yeah, this happens all the time. If you have enough students, then you always have this happen, which can be a little demoralizing, but I used to be a lot meaner in these situations because somehow I'm always worried about the students who don't contact me at all who do all the work they're supposed to do and never ask for anything to be regraded or anything like that. I feel like I need to be an advocate for them because in their silence, I don't want them to get tromped over by a squeaky wheel. On the other hand, someone, someone who's in that situation, they've got stuff going on in their life I don't know about.

And that doesn't mean that they should get college credit for what they're doing. The credit reflects, not their effort, but it reflects what they've done. So, my strategy has evolved over the years. And it's kind of funny, because I had to explain it to, I have five teaching assistants this quarter. And they've been encountering that in their own sections. And they're always surprised. I say, write them back a nice email. Hey, I'm surprised. I'm sorry that you're, you're struggling. You've missed a lot. I think at this point it's, it's unlikely that you're going to get a great outcome, but we don't know what a great outcome is for you. Here's what I think you could do.

If you come to my office, I tell them I'll give you some study questions and we could meet. For instance, we could meet, you know, this many times between now and then. And I'll, I'll lay it out concretely. I'll say, you know, you've got 12 days till the final exam. You don't have scores for all these things.

Nonetheless, if you were to get this score on the final, you could still pass this class. So, if we met six times, I think that that's a possibility. You know, let me know what you think about this strategy, and we can go from there. And so, I, I try to say I'm going to do everything I can to help you. I would say about half the time, I don't hear from the student again. That, that was their one grasp of, oh, everything's going wrong, but I really don't have the, the wherewithal to, to make it happen. They're getting, they're not ready and they're going to, they're going to solve it another way.

But I've had other students, I remember I had one student. And he, he said, he said, really, you think I could pass? He said, 'cause I was thinking that I might need to just withdraw, take an incomplete or something like that. And he was on a sports team at UCLA. And I said, yeah, I said, we, you know, I can fit it into my schedule. I'll help you. I've seen you, you know, in class. I know that you're not completely invisible and let's, let's give it a try.

So, he said, okay. And I remember the next day I got a call, not even a call, like at my door, someone from the athletic department saying, oh, you told Jordan that he, he could, you know, make it through. And I said, yeah, he totally can do it, but he's going to have to put in a little bit of effort here. And they said, ah, it'd be bad if, if, you know, he doesn't pass the class, blah, blah, blah. And I said, I know, but you know, he, you know, he's a, he's a good kid. And I want him to get, you know, a good experience. And he stuck with it and he did well. And they came to me, and they said, thanks so much. That was a really good lesson. We're glad it all worked out. Blah, blah, blah.

And I remember like a year later, so at these meetings, I got to talk with them. I'm like, wow. So, you like, you play basketball. Like, could you, could you get, get drafted some day? Like, yeah, maybe I said, would you drop out of college? He said, yeah, I might. He said, I could, I could buy a house for my mom, you know, with that first contract, you know, where we don't have much money.

And the next year I had an interaction with the athletic department guy about another student. And I said, hey, whatever, you know, happened to Jordan. How's he, how's he doing? Did he get things turned around? He looked at me, the guy, like, like I was crazy. He said, he plays on the Lakers now. (laughter) I said, you're kidding. You're kidding. So, yeah. And in fact, he said, I still, I saw him recently and he even told me that he, he still had great feelings about how you helped him and kind of got, you know, salvage that quarter and that, you know, if, if you want to come to a game to let me know, blah, blah, blah, blah.

[00:57:04] **Professor Floros:** I was going to say, did you get good, did you get floor tickets?

[00:57:08] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Because I feel like the thing I have of most value in my life is my reputation as, as a teacher, that every student who comes in knows that they are getting a fair shake. I am not playing favorites. I will help everyone, but no one gets a fair deal. I am friendly, but we're not friends. I thought, that would not look good. So, I appreciated it, but I, I, but so I didn't. So,

[00:57:30] **Professor Floros:** You're a stronger man than me. Okay.

[00:57:33] **Professor Jay Phelan:** Only because, only because I'm selfish. I didn't want anyone ever to even question.

[00:57:38] **Professor Floros:** Okay. See, for me, selfish would have been, uh, I will take season tickets on that.

Music Interlude

Fantastic. Thank you so much. I've, I really appreciated talking to you and you'll probably get follow up emails and calls for years to come asking for more advice. In The Classroom today has been Professor Jay Phelan, a professor of biology in the Life Sciences Core Program at UCLA. Professor Phelan, thank you so much for joining me today to talk about student success.

[00:58:18] **Professor Jay Phelan:** You're welcome. Thanks for having me, Kate. This was fun. You're good.

[00:58:23] **Professor Floros:** Professor Phelan's forthcoming co-authored book from Princeton University Press, The Secret Syllabus: A Guide to the Unwritten Rules of College Success, will be available in May 2022. You've been listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

I'm Professor Floros. That's all I've got for this week. Class dismissed.

Exit Music