

# Rise, Teach, Learn - Season 5 Episode 2

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## Interview with President Perez

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Hello and welcome to Rise, Teach, Learn. I'm your host, Jamie Gunderson. In this episode, we speak to Chico State President, Steve Perez about his experience teaching and his ideas supporting teaching and learning here at Chico State. I'd like to start by welcoming my cohost Dr. Zach Justus and this episode's guest, Dr. Steve Perez. So, welcome. Thank you for chatting with me today. Thank you for being here.

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It's great to be here.

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All right. So, President Perez, the Fall Convocation was all about telling our story here at Chico State and I would love to know more about your story, your journey here through teaching to become our President.

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Well, I've had a pretty fortunate career in any number of ways. I was an undergrad at UC San Diego, and I was a lot of different majors, I changed my major several times, I was a biology major, biochemistry major, genetics, molecular biology, I would take classes and like them, and change my major. And it was all sort of within biology. So, it didn't really sidetrack me too much. But I was working in a hospital, I was going to be trying to be a doctor work that hospital and the doctor said, don't be a doctor. And I didn't know what to do. And so, I changed my major to economics had already taken a couple of classes. And they were generalized classes that I was taking, and liked it and finished all my classes my last year, and then graduated and wanted to get a job as quickly as I possibly could. I worked as a market analyst for a biotech company, and realized I really liked school, after all, and so went back to graduate school so I could stay in, in education forever. And it's worked out pretty good for me, had a couple of jobs after I got out of graduate school. I was at Virginia Commonwealth University, then Washington State University, and then we hit the lottery and were able to come back to California and work in the CSU and have been here ever since.

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So, our question, next question is about your time in the classroom as a teacher, and we were hoping that you could share with us a little bit about what your favorite experiences were in the classroom. And then if you have an embarrassing anecdote, you would like to share it and make everybody feel more comfortable.

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Well, I really liked teaching, I taught a lot of different classes, particularly when I was department chair, and I'd saved my name for last to fill in schedule. So, I taught a lot of classes that were outside of my, my specific area within economics, but my favorite classes to teach were introductory macroeconomics and sports economics. I liked a big crowd, like the big audience. So, I taught some pretty big intro classes I taught in every modality you can think of. I was hybrid and high flex before it was a thing. Back in the early mid 2000s, I had a class that I did probably about 30 or 40 people in a TV studio. And then that was broadcast on local area network in Sacramento. And I had a great time spot. I was twice a week, Tuesday, Thursday evenings in primetime. It was me and Ryan Seacrest, we were the only ones that had two primetime slots. And, and a pretty big, pretty big at least region to have the show as I would get a call a week from somebody in the Sacramento area saying, "hey, I tripped over your show. Do you mind if I ask you a question?" And in my head, I thought, Wow, you need a better TV. But it was always really good. And the students in the class would interact. And then we'd get calls even live during the class. So that was super fun. I've taught massive like four or 500 student online classes, and pretty small introductory no, excuse me, econometrics classes and research methods classes between 15 and 20 students and enjoyed it very much, I would pretty frequently change up my format. I taught a class once when I was at Washington State. I called it Real Time Economics or so Just-in-time Economics, I think. And I wrote a syllabus saying we're going to cover all these topics, and I don't know what order we're going to cover them. And I'd read the newspaper on Monday, and then try to teach it here's what you need to know to understand the story that we would have just read. And it was great until the last couple of weeks. And I had some topics to cover that I wasn't sure I was going to get stories for that it worked out okay. Students like that one. I taught a class case studies methods class in I was an intermediate macroeconomics class. And that was a disaster. I was terrible at that didn't work out so well. I don't know whether it was a disaster or embarrassing. My second son was born at the hospital at Washington State. And so, my older son was three years old at the time. We were in the hospital room. My new son was just born, but I had to teach a class on the plus side it was only about 100 yards from the hospital room. into my classroom. So, I took my three-year-old and predictably, that lasted about 10 minutes. And he got to color on the overhead projector with color pens and wander around the room but nobody was paying attention and I wasn't doing a good job anyway. So, we called that one, I sent everybody home. After that one, I loved it. I liked it. Sports economics class was a great class to teach. Talk about really interesting stuff that the dirty secret was; you're going to learn some economics at the end of it. And so, I can teach it anytime in the day, and any size room, it was always fun. We were talking about embarrassing things. Yes. And I will tell you one of the most embarrassing things that happened and what it actually wasn't a classroom. But it dealt with it when I even have a hard time talking because embarrassing.

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You know, I'm going to put this out....

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I taught a lot online classes, right and, and very different experience for students. Particularly, in an intro, macroeconomics class, as Sac State, it's Econ 1 and so people take it first. Because it's a even though it doesn't really matter which order you take the classes. And so, I would often get students the very first semester taking this class, and now it's online. And particularly when we first started students

that weren't adept at navigating computer system and a learning management system and things like that, or might not be the best at motivating themselves are keeping themselves on track with due dates. Weren't as successful, in fact, would often fail, probably, in fact, knowingly not through no fault of their own. This was not the right environment to introduce somebody to college to. And so, I wrote a syllabus, the next time I was trying to be kind and say, look, think about yourself. If you aren't great at a computer, if you're not adept at motivating yourself, you should not be in this class, you have a very high likelihood of not being successful. Thinking that this, this pre warning is going to help students pre select out. And so, it was my syllabus for a couple of years. And fast forward a number of years later, we're talking about diversity, equity inclusion, DWF rates and classes. And I believe it was from USC, I can't remember the school, but I think it's from USC, they had a rubric for syllabi, to run your syllabi through to see whether it's an inclusive syllabus. And it's not when you write that at the beginning of your syllabus. And so, I had somebody run mine through there. And I was horrified because they said, "Well, imagine you're a first-generation student that's never been to college. And what is this telling you telling you? You don't belong in this class?" And I was, I was horrified that that was the message I was not the message I was intending to send. I was intending to, again behind and say, look, think about whether this is right for you come back later if it's not. But it did, it did signify to me we do need to reflect on what we're telling our students, when we first meet them. How are we introducing first gen students or their students that might not be super comfortable or confident when they're when they're entering our classrooms or online spaces. However, we're interacting with them, how we present ourselves, and I'd say personally, how I present myself to that class makes a huge difference that I just wasn't thinking about in that way.

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How long have you been teaching?

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I started, well, I was started as a professor in 1994. I was a teaching assistant through graduate school. So, 1989

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Nice. That's awesome. So, 30 plus years.

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I've been out of a classroom since 2016, when I became the Vice Provost. Prior to that, I was an assistant for the President and I taught some when I was doing that, too. But so, it's been a little while since I've been at least for a whole semester. I've been in classes talking but not the instructor of record.

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I have to laugh because and I'm going to just pivot on this whole, like personal experience point. But the way that you talk about the cable news network teaching, that's how I did Driver's Ed, like you had to tune in, at like five in the morning on like Fridays, and like watch this 30-minute episode and then do a corresponding worksheet, send that in, and then you would get your driver's, I guess permit, which is terrible, because it took me like four times to get my actual license.

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Whatever it takes.

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Yeah, exactly. It's fun to hear about your teaching experience. Zach and I both love teaching. And we kind of have a soft spot in our heart for the Office of Faculty Development, which largely supports teaching and learning on our campus. Over the past, I would say, well, I think it's been the theme of Faculty Development always support. But I would say there's been a concerted effort in since COVID, to kind of expand our resources and kind of push faculty to expand their pedagogy. So, I'm just kind of interested to know, what is your vision for supporting that work?

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First, let me just say I think the Office Faculty Development is doing a fantastic job, I've been in a lot of universities. And my sense is here, faculty embrace the ability to go to the office and get better at our craft here more than other places. And that's a credit to the director. And a credit to what's being offered by the office to our faculty, and also a credit to our faculty that want to get better. We, we are a teaching university, we come here for our students to be successful. And we need to continually try to get better at it. It's also more interesting when you're trying to get better at what we're doing. And we could talk about using different pedagogical methods using different delivery methods. As I talked about, I did, I taught in lots of different ways. And part of that was just to make it interesting, make it new, but how do you reach our students better? How to how do we get to more students and give them access to what we try to teach and what we want them to learn? In different ways, but also, how do we reach different students? As you asked, I've have been teaching since the early 1990s, our students are different now than they were then we need to be able to talk to them differently now than we did them. And so, I'm very appreciative of what the office is doing, particularly getting out and talking about diversity and equity, and how do we infuse that into our curriculum? And how do you talk about it in different disciplines? In different ways? It's crucially important for our students and for our faculty to be successful. So, your question, though, is how will we support it? We'll support it by it's an office that is rightfully in academic affairs, we will continue funding it and supporting it in whatever ways we possibly can or whatever the ways are needed. I'm not going to say here's what the office ought to be doing. That ought to come from our faculty. What do our faculty want to learn? What do we want to get better at? Where, what avenues can we help our professors and our faculty and instructors? Where do they want to learn? That's what we ought to do. It shouldn't it shouldn't come from the President; I think it should come from our instructors.

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When I worked in faculty development in my first shift, I learned during New Faculty Orientation, that my perception of the experience of faculty when they come into the university was woefully inadequate. I had an experience like Steve, I, I taught throughout graduate school, my first day here as a professor, I had been teaching in classrooms for over six years. And I just assumed that everybody had a similar experience. But then I learned that STEM faculty, people and oftentimes technical anthropology fields, oftentimes, their first day as a professor, here was their first day teaching. And I was kind of horrified about that, because we had resources in faculty development. But I thought these resources are not a

match for faculty that have never been in front of the classroom before. So, I worked with a faculty member and the School of Education, to spin up a sort of teaching basics faculty learning community. And we were really nervous about that for something for a reason that Steve identified earlier because we were talking about it. And initially, I was thinking, how am I going to pitch this to people? Because is the pitch, "Hey, are you bad at your job? Come get marginally better." But by enrolling here, you're announcing to everybody, I don't, I don't know the first thing about creating a lesson plan, what a learning outcome is, any of those pieces. But to the credit of the faculty, the response to that was overwhelming, to the point where we couldn't fit everybody that needed to do it. And I had to knock on doors until I got some partners around campus to help support that with some, with some one-time funding. But I think the faculty here are desirous of improvement and that there's not ego involved in that the way that there is oftentimes a stereotype with higher education. I agree. It's one of the things I appreciate most about the faculty. And I will say, I'm not sure I knew that before I before we rolled that out the first time and there was such a positive response. It's it takes some vulnerability to say, "No, I need help with this super basic thing that it seems like everybody around me already knows how to do."

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Yeah, it's interesting you say that because I come from the School of Education. So, my background is pedagogy. And it's hard to like step out of that experience and be like, what would it be like to stand in front of a group of students not having the decades of experience I have and so it was interesting in that lens. And when I transitioned over to faculty development, I realized that like all the things that I take for granted that I just like instinctively know, because they've been taught to me throughout my career, that is not the case for some of our folks, like say in the content specific fields, you know.

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So, Steve, this will build a little bit on what we were talking about earlier. So, students want more online options or multimodal options to take their courses. What is your vision for Chico State Online Chico State's online future based on student demand? What's your stance on that sort of transition, as we're in this inflection point,

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Our job is to provide access to higher education, high quality, higher education. And I think we do a really fantastic job of it in any number of ways. But when you look at our region, exceptionally large, spread out rural, not densely populated, in lots of ways that there's, it's highly likely there are people that would like to be a Chico State student that can't come here regularly. So, I feel like it's our responsibility to provide access to higher ed to those people as well. And so, for that reason alone, we should be exploring how can we do distributed education be it online or any other way. And as I said, I've taught, I've taught a lot of online classes, I've designed a textbook to help facilitate an online class. And I think we can do it well. We can do well in person and the different skills and its different ways of delivering the content. But I think that's our jobs. And so ultimately, however our students, its demand driven, however our students want to consume what we're providing, we should be available to them in that way. I don't see it as either or I think online and in class complement each other in any number of ways. So, I hope we continue to develop new programs, I hope we continue to reach out at the same time as enhancing and improving what we're doing here on campus in person.

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I think that kind of ties back to what you mentioned earlier about the students like just evolving, they're very different than when you started, like in the late 90s or early, early 90s.

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Just kind of a curveball question. But what would you say is the biggest change, you've noticed in that span of time,

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The speed with which stuff happens, right? So, I, when I first started there, we didn't have email. Literally, we didn't have email we moved to, we moved to Virginia, my wife and I both grew up in California. And my wife and her mom still in very good relationship that communicate all the time. And when we first got there, they were writing letters, and it takes a long time. So, they would type letters on a computer, print them out, and fax them to each other. So, they manufactured their own email, so that we can communicate, we didn't have websites, we didn't have anything, this is, like I said, it was a while ago. And so, when you think about what that means, and how things have changed where we first started, I don't think we used PowerPoint. In fact, I know we didn't use PowerPoint back then. And overhead slides and how do we get, how do you do a class? And then you get PowerPoint, I think that was probably my first one I know, my first spreadsheet was Lotus, before going into Excel, so I don't think there was anything before PowerPoint. But even there, you were just doing the same stuff. Your overheads are now electronic. And it's not until you realize, well, now I have a computer and I have access to a computer while I'm teaching. And you leverage that to do it in a different way. So, I could pull up Excel spreadsheets, or we could show videos or is until you under realize we're doing it differently. Not the same, but differently. And we can access different technologies and different ways of learning and teaching as a result of it. All that's happened in the last 20 years. And our students have grown up with all of that at their fingertips, way more adept at it than we are, way more comfortable with everything dealing with information technology, certainly than I am. That changes the way we do everything. And it will continue to evolve. And I think it's going to evolve at an exponential rate. And so as soon as we think we got it figured out, we'll be behind again. Now we've got artificial intelligence that by the time I finish this sentence will have changed between when I started. And so how do we as an institution, how do we as faculty, how do we in higher education, harness this in ways that are going to be helpful and productive for our students as they enter the workforce when they leave. It would be, I would imagine, short-sighted of us to think they're not going to somehow utilize artificial intelligence in the future. How do we show them how to do it responsibly, ethically, and productively? That's going to be a challenge for us.

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What you mentioned about the surface region, I grew up in this area, just 20 miles south of here. And I've always had a hard time explaining the university to people outside California, because they hear California and they have a real strong set of assumptions. And then you have to explain that the surface region for the university is the size of Ohio. Like,

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I think it's the size of Maine. Yeah, it's I think it's bigger than Ohio. But it's not. So, it's Maine.



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Thank you. Thank you. Okay.

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I might be wrong. But that's what I've been told that. Yeah.

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So, oftentimes, I've, in talking with people on other campuses about something that we're doing here, there's this assumption of, oh, well, that works because you're in this massive urban area with all these resources and huge businesses nearby. And it's like, no, we, we, my wife's family lives in Humboldt. So, we drive the 99 all the time. I mean, there is a Shasta satellite campus in McKinleyville. It's, I mean, there's nothing else there. There's a grocery store and a lumber mill. And the challenges of really serving the region, are I think, one that were maybe in the position to meet for the first time, and maybe accelerated coming out of COVID My heart's always been with those rural areas, because that's where I'm from. I grew up in East Biggs, it's not even really a town. And

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I have wondered about that. pretty frequently. Yeah, it's um, there's, there's the one to Biggs and then no number to East Biggs, right? So, what does that mean?

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yeah, yeah, Biggs is an actual town, that's where I went to school. But yeah, East Biggs is a what's called a failed township. And those things are all over the surface region. And I always think to myself, like that's the students that are that are there or in Modoc County, like those are the students that are oftentimes invisible to us here. But my real hope is that we're in a position to serve them, truly serve them for the first time.

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Yeah. And they shouldn't be invisible to us. Right, that we take this very seriously. That's our responsibility. That is our job. Imagine the state of Maine or the state of Ohio, whichever the right comparison is, both of them are huge. We're the only public four-year institution in that region. So, think of that for a state that how does, we talk about education, how do you have rural education? How do you have rural health care, where you're not going to have a major medical center access for a good portion of this is the same types of things. And we're training nurses here. How do we teach them how to do telehealth all sorts of things that end it's a region that doesn't have universal broadband, to everybody. And still, we it's our jobs, to make it accessible for those students to be able to access higher ed, to be able to do whatever they want to transform their lives. It's a huge challenge. huge responsibility, but wonderful opportunity if we do this well.

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And there you have it, folks. Today, we heard from our president, Dr. Steve Perez, and I'd like to thank him and Dr. Zach Justus for their contributions to this episode. Please don't forget that you can access previous episodes of Rise, Teach, Learn as well as all the resources associated with this and other

episodes through our FDEV podcast webpage. A big thank you to you for listening and until next time, we got this Wildcats. We would like to thank the Mechoopda on whose traditional lands this recording is taking place. Without their support and continued positive presence in our community, we would be unable to afford the cultural and educational work that is at the heart of this recording.