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UCLA LPPI received \$15 million to launch Latina Futures Project. Rocio Perez is using research and advocacy to address the issues affecting Latinos. Photo: Rocio Perez

Latina Public Policy student humanizing statistics through research and advocacy

Rocio Perez, a first-generation Latina Public Policy student using her career to address Latinos and other communities of color pressing issues through research



By **Jennifer Hernandez**
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Rocio Perez is a first-generation Latina, born and raised in the Westlake-MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles—a predominantly low-income and immigrant community.

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She is currently a second-year Master of Public Policy student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Luskin School of Public Affairs and a fellow at **UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute (LPPI)** — focuses on addressing Latinos and other communities of color pressing issues through research, advocacy, mobilization, and leadership development to propel policy reforms, **website** states.

“Communities of color are the country’s economic engine, future workforce, and greatest share of new voters. At UCLA LPPI, we work to meet the needs of communities often overlooked,” said Sonja Diaz, Founding Director, UCLA LPPI.

Rocio values research because it “represents a proactive role in informing legislation at all levels of government about Latino and immigrant stories in all social, political, and economic aspects of society.”

Recently UCLA LPPI **received** \$15 million to launch Latina Futures Project, a Lab to support policy research, leadership programs, and civic engagements with a Latina perspective.

“I am proud of the legislature’s \$15M investment to launch the Latina Futures 2050 Lab. This historic investment will allow us to create policies to address the inequities Latina women face in entertainment, healthcare and the judicial system,” said Senator Maria Elena Durazo, chair of the California Latino Legislative Caucus. “As we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and ascend to become the 4th biggest economy in the world, we cannot afford to leave Latina women behind.”

Latinas represent 19.4% of California’s population, but are only 8.5% of all executive appointments, as **reported** by UCLA LPPI.

Rocio understands the underrepresentation of Latinos in executive branch appointments— she took advantage of real-world experiences by applying to countless internships, volunteer opportunities and using professors to network.



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She was previously a Policy Advocate Fellow at Western Center On Law and Poverty (2018), an intern at Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (2017-2018), Legislative Scholar at Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (2018), research assistant at Northern California Rapid Response Network (2019), Health Equity Scholar at the California Endowment (2019), Immigration Policy intern at Center for American Progress (2020), Emerson National Hunger Fellow at California Association of Food Banks (2020), and a fellow at the Center for Law and Social Policy (2021).

“Every opportunity, I built upon and gained valuable insight into the policy making process—from organizing protests, to staffing a bill at the state level, interning on Capitol Hill in DC, and doing research for think tanks,” explained Perez. “I’ve learned to contextualize my experiences and use research as an advocacy tool.”



As a LPPI fellow, Perez explains she was able to use R Studio, an open source software program for statistical analysis, to analyze data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of Economic Analysis and create visualizations for 14 state-level profiles across eight critical issue areas, including educational attainment, poverty, and health insurance.

Rocio also collaborated in the creation of the Latino Data Hub, which will have data from verified sources on demographics, socioeconomics and civic participation and include statistics and information on climate change, economic opportunity among other topics to assist policymakers in designing and promoting policies that benefit Latino communities.

She wants young Latinas interested in pursuing a career in research to advocate for themselves and ask for help. She wouldn't be where she is now in her career without self-advocating or the advice of mentors. This is why it is important for Rocio to humanize statistics.

“Coming from a mixed-status family, I witnessed and assisted my parents in their struggles in accessing healthcare, working in garment factories and constantly fearing deportation,” Rocio explained. “I approach research with a personal connection and sense of urgency to ensure that our stories are heard because there is a person and story behind every statistic.”

The student concluded by assuring that “everyone has their own path and their own pace to accomplish their goals.”

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