I still remember my first day as instructor of record. The classroom was still empty when I walked in. As I took my place behind the podium and looked out at the rows of seats, I felt a rush of excitement: something new was about to start, something intense, thrilling, and full of possibilities. I also remember a different kind of excitement: as an undergraduate, my dean recommended I take a social psychology class, and I still recall the anticipation of starting an intellectual journey in a field completely unknown to me. In the best possible world, the teacher's excitement for a new course and the student's anticipation toward the material meet, and together they create something memorable. Over the years, I have built my teaching around three principles that work toward this goal.

Active Engagement

Students learn by doing. Whether teaching large lectures or small seminars, I keep engagement high by using varied instructional techniques and bringing genuine enthusiasm for the material. While my courses have a traditional lecture component, I think it is crucial to students' engagement that they interact with the course material as early as possible. Before class, students preview the lesson content, reflect on connections to their own lives, and read the relevant book chapter on the social learning platform Perusall, where they post comments, questions, and respond to classmates. Seeing students questions on Perusall before class allows me to address their specific concerns during lectures. So by the time they arrive, they have already engaged with the material from multiple angles. Then I dedicate class time to active and collaborative learning, with students working on problems individually and in small groups, applying concepts immediately after I introduce them.

In psychology courses, I channel this same approach into fostering a sense of wonder and excitement for discovery. Cognitive phenomena offer a unique opportunity: the subject matter is the students themselves. When I teach about attention, memory, or decision-making, I encourage students to observe these processes in their own lives, turning abstract concepts into personal discoveries that spark genuine curiosity about the mind.

Building this kind of deep engagement and understanding matters more than ever. In an age of rapid AI advancement, AI can be a powerful tool, but using it effectively requires foundational knowledge. There is no better place to build that foundation than the college classroom, and I structure my courses so that students develop genuine understanding before turning to external aids.

Belonging and Community

Learning requires feeling safe and connected. Before the semester begins, I send an introductory email where I present myself and the course. I encourage students to show up and interact: with me, with the material, and with their classmates, because feeling part of a group with a shared goal improves learning. For example, when teaching Expository Writing during Rutgers' first fully online semester in Fall 2020, I used breakout rooms not only for peer review but also to help students get to know one another, with quick introductions at the start of each class. Because I was teaching freshmen starting college in an unprecedented situation, I felt that a sense of community was essential for learning. That semester, I also proactively reached out to campus mental health services to support a struggling student.

Recognizing that each student faces different life situations, I maintain flexibility while holding high expectations. I offer varied opportunities to demonstrate understanding: problem sets, data analysis projects, coding exercises, reflective essays. Feedback is a crucial moment in learning, and my approach varies by context: in writing assignments, I pace it carefully early on to avoid overwhelming students; in statistics, students need clear understanding of what they got right and wrong. In all cases, I clarify not just what needs improvement but how to achieve it. My approach

conveys that assessments measure learning, not personal worth, and students know they can come to me with questions and concerns.

When teaching math-based courses, I work to minimize students' anxiety by telling them upfront that all they need is basic algebra; the rest is just careful, systematic work. Some concepts may be counterintuitive, but that is part of what makes statistics interesting. I also emphasize that questions are the essential way we learn, and provide grading rubrics from the start so students can see exactly what makes an assignment successful. This transparency reduces anxiety and keeps the focus on learning.

Opportunity

My goal is to give students the tools to think critically, to understand the relevance of what they learn to contemporary society, and to see themselves as active scholars rather than passive recipients. For example, in statistics courses, I aim for students to grasp both the motivation and mechanics behind statistical procedures, while also recognizing statistics' role throughout history and in current decision-making. Students should be able to analyze a problem, identify the most appropriate statistical test for the question, carry out the test and interpret the results. But they should also be able to reflect critically on the impact that statistics has had on the development of science and on our society. To achieve this goal, I always dedicate some time to consider the historical context. The most recent advances in machine learning and AI have made this kind of statistical fluency even more important.

Overall, I want students to develop intellectual confidence and research mindsets and to recognize themselves as capable of original inquiry. For this reason, when teaching research methods I encouraged them to build their own experiments from scratch; when teaching statistics I provided opportunity to tackle larger projects autonomously; when teaching expository writing I pushed them to make textual connections that may have not been readily apparent. As my course evaluations reflect, students appreciate being pushed "out of comfort zones as writers" and learning to "think about things in ways never thought about before." I want to create an environment where students feel safe to take intellectual risks.

Teaching can be demanding, but it is filled with joys that nothing else can replace: the moment understanding lights up a student's face, an unexpected question that makes us see things differently, the shared sense of purpose when a class comes together in the pursuit of knowledge.

Each student in front of me has made a commitment by enrolling in college and coming to class, a commitment to themselves in the hope of a better future. What I offer in return is my attention, my care, my passion for what I teach, and my responsiveness to their needs. My primary goal is my students' success: not just doing well in the class, but developing as critical thinkers, building strong habits of study and work, and becoming more confident and ready to tackle new challenges.