

## **TEACHING STATEMENT**

My teaching philosophy is based on the premise that every student has a right to expect and receive the best education possible. This comes about in a variety of ways, one of which is the student-teacher relationship. Even at a big university, students should be able to connect with their teachers. I try to reach out to the students in a variety of ways. I share stories of my childhood or experiences that relate to the subject matter. I try to answer every question, respond to every e-mail and be available for out-of-class discussion, whether in the hallway or at the office. I begin every conversation with a student with the assumption they honestly want to learn. Teaching is a partnership, where helping the student learn and grow as a responsible citizen is more important than imparting information. How a student views a course and the material is related to their experience with the teacher. That doesn't always mean being a best friend to the student, but it does mean being compassionate and understanding.

Enthusiasm is contagious and you have to give positive energy if you expect the student to take an interest. There is something extremely rewarding about watching a student become interested in the subject. A teacher plays an important role in helping a student understand the relevance of the material. It is not a question of forcing information on the student, but one of finding a way of relating the material to each individual.

I teach all of my classes differently, depending on the subject matter and level of course. I also vary each class slightly, depending on the changing dynamic of the students. Even in a class of 300 there are slight differences in how they respond as a group. Finding ways to engage them in the classroom is part of shaping the learning experience. A visit to my introductory classes might find the students acting as a "professor for the day," making up questions for the day's pop quiz, or singing a song with a horticulture theme. In my large classes, lectures are still the primary method of information delivery, but my style changes frequently and often relates to a timely topic such as why the leaves turn colors in the fall or why the hedge plant surrounding the football field is really a non-native, invasive weed. Students are encouraged to participate in some fashion, even if just to participate in a skit depicting the movement of water through different textured soils. In the more advanced design and construction courses, students take many field trips to interview "clients," take measurements or make observations of real projects. Students are expected to analyze the information and solve problems, using what has been taught in class. There is much more emphasis on how things are put together and creative solutions to problems than learning hard facts or memorizing numbers.

In some respects, the real learning occurs outside the classroom, when the student reflects on material covered or uses what has been learned in some other venue. The community around the University of Georgia has a high poverty rate, a large underserved minority population, and a love-hate relationship with the predominantly wealthy, white student population. Because of this, I have chosen to make community engagement an integral component of my classes. Starting with the introductory course, I give credit for community volunteer horticulture activities. In advanced courses, community engagement is not only required, but the primary arena in which learning takes place. In this way, students are exposed to the concept of community engagement as not only a moral and ethical ideal, but as an opportunity to practice their profession.

My role as a teacher is to support and mentor the student during their college experience. Developing the student as a person is more important to me than creating a walking textbook. Developing process skills, such as critical thinking, writing, and problem solving is far more important than teaching facts. I try to nurture intellectual curiosity and encourage students to live a life worth living. It is not that horticulture knowledge is not important, it is, but I believe teamwork, ethics, and social commitment; go hand in hand with a productive career.