

For me, diversity and inclusion in education are not abstract ideals, but essentials that must be incorporated into teaching. I believe that education has a great impact when it reaches those who have historically been left out of the conversation. For these students, access to education can open doors to careers previously unimaginable, build confidence in their own voices, and provide the tools to actively shape and uplift their communities. My career has been shaped by a commitment to intentionally creating learning opportunities for underprivileged communities, especially those facing barriers to education.

This came into focus when I joined In League with STEM. Our team partners with the East Central Illinois Youth for Christ's Program to engage primarily Black middle and high school students with STEM topics. I worked directly with students at Centennial High School, Jefferson Middle School, Franklin STEAM Academy, Edison Middle School, and Central High School, during their lunch hours. I developed exciting robotics curriculums, organized technical talks, and facilitated activities that reached nearly 400 students. The Champaign County Community Coalition invited our team to their community meeting to recognize and celebrate our early impact on local students. One of my favorite moments was watching a student—quiet at the start of the activity—light up when he successfully programmed his robot to follow the shapes on the ground. This student rarely showed any interest in classes, but was jumping excitedly and showcasing his accomplishment to his peers. It was a powerful reminder of how hands-on, extracurricular experiences can spark curiosity and confidence in ways that traditional classrooms sometimes cannot.

Other outreach opportunities have reinforced this same lesson: curiosity is sparked most powerfully when students experience science for themselves. At MendelFest and the World of Genomics, I designed interactive robotics activities for museum visitors ranging from preschoolers to grandparents. Over 1,000 people engaged with these exhibits, some from families with little prior exposure to robotics or higher education. I learned to translate technical research into accessible explanations that lowered barriers to participation and showed that science is for everyone, reinforcing my commitment to creating learning opportunities for communities often excluded from STEM.

In my role supporting the Teaching Assistant Training Course—which enrolls over 200 students each semester—I have grown from managing logistics to actively shaping how future TAs foster inclusive and equitable learning environments. Beyond coordinating grading and course structure, I have contributed to conversations on how to teach diverse student populations, including international students, LGBTQ+ students, and students from a variety of cultural and academic backgrounds. As part of the TA panel, I shared

practical advice on running compassionate and professional office hours, balancing clarity with empathy, and applying growth mindset principles to student interactions. In one instance, I supported a TA who expressed concerns about stalking by validating her experience, reminding her that such behavior is unacceptable, and encouraging her to establish clear but compassionate boundaries with students. I also connected her with Title IX resources, modeling how TAs can both protect their own wellbeing and create safe learning spaces for others. These experiences have deepened my commitment to “teaching the teachers” by equipping them to recognize and respond to difference, ensuring that classrooms remain spaces of respect, equity, and belonging for all students.

My commitment to access also extends beyond school walls. At the Danville Correctional Center, I teach for-credit University of Illinois courses through the Education Justice Project (EJP). Many of my students there have not had structured educational opportunities in years, and prison environments come with unique challenges. To overcome the lack of internet access, I set up a production PrairieLearn server that allows us to teach introductory Python programming and Excel entirely offline. Class sizes are small—just 15 students—but the impact is huge. I will never forget when a student, after completing his first Python project, told me, “I didn’t think I could learn something like this at my age, especially in here.” Moments like that made the late nights debugging and testing the server worth it.

These experiences have taught me that equity in education requires going where the need is greatest and adapting teaching to fit the environment. Whether I am working with a middle school student who has never met an engineer, a museum visitor encountering robotics for the first time, or an incarcerated adult rediscovering his love of learning, my goal is the same: to open doors that have long been closed and to equip students to walk through them with confidence.

As a teaching professor, I will continue building programs that connect underrepresented students with role models, hands-on STEM experiences, and the belief that they belong in these spaces. Ensuring that students from all backgrounds feel seen, supported, and empowered to succeed is not an accessory to my teaching—it is central to how I define my role as an educator.