Dr. Keith Burton

The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence is proud to highlight Dr. Keith Burton, whose teaching and scholarship emphasize scientific skepticism, critical thinking, and helping students see where they belong in psychology.

One of Dr. Burton's favorite "oh, I get it now!" moments comes from his research methods courses, where he uses a hands-on approach to help students distinguish correlation from causation. Students evaluate popular press reports of scientific findings and assess whether those reports have appropriately conveyed the research results. Often, he notes, popular news outlets assume a causal relationship "when doing so isn't warranted based on the methods the researchers used." Students then locate the original research publication to compare what the scientists said with what the journalists said. The differences can be "striking"—and students often find them "surprising and appalling!" Dr. Burton calls it an "eye-opening and clearly engaging experience" that "warms my scientific heart."

Another formative influence on his teaching came early in his career when a mentor offered this simple advice: "the less of me, the better." Dr. Burton took that to mean less lecturing and more space for students to learn through effort and practice. He put it into action by incorporating more in-class individual and group activities—mostly ungraded—specifically "to allow them to struggle and fail without consequence" while engaging with key concepts. The impact was immediate: "Students were involved in ways I hadn't seen before," and it was clear from exam scores and written assignments that "things were sinking in better." That idea has informed his teaching ever since.

Dr. Burton's broad research interests lie "in the realm of emotion and motivation," and he is currently contemplating examining them in the context of student use of AI/LLM systems for coursework. One construct he's exploring is "AI Guilt," and how it might relate to concepts like "imposter syndrome, self-esteem, and agency." He is especially proud of the studies he has completed with undergraduate and graduate students over his 20+ years as a faculty member—work he describes as being "in the service of building a new generation of scientists." Among his individual projects, he notes that his research on "the psychophysiology of emotion in those with Alzheimer's disease" stands out as "an enormous endeavor" that pushed knowledge forward in areas that "hadn't received much attention previously."

Ultimately, what Dr. Burton values most is "seeing students 'get it,' particularly when that light bulb moment stirs their passions and informs them not just about the discipline of psychology, but also about their place in it and where they might want to go."