Having obtained almost all of my education in Brazil, it goes without saying that I grew up in one of the most diverse places in the world in terms of ethnicity, ancestry, religion and economic privilege. And yet this plurality was not always evident to me. My education before college happened in private schools, where my classmates came from similar family histories and enjoyed similar opportunities as me. It was only when I got into Universidade de São Paulo - São Carlos, a public university, that I truly started interacting with people from different ethnicities, national origins and economic backgrounds. I learned about the problems that they had to overcome to get there: language barriers, unequal opportunities, even racism. Nonetheless, I also knew that this environment was still far from being representative of the people of my country: the fact that public universities are the most strict with admissions in Brazil meant that a high proportion of my classmates still consisted of people who could afford a good education growing up; the fact that my curriculum consisted solely of Math and Physics courses in a country where women are severely outnumbered in the exact sciences meant that more than 90% of my classmates were men.

Hence, when I came to Rutgers University as a PhD student, I was much more aware of the problem of underrepresentation of minorities in universities around the world, both in the student body and among faculty members. Rutgers takes pride in being one of the most diverse schools in the country and in the initiatives of its Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement. I was also pleasantly surprised to learn about the university’s Office of Disability Services, which provides resources to students with learning impairments or other disabilities, and about the federal laws protecting a student’s privacy in this matter. Nothing like this existed in Brazil during my time there. And I realized that I too have my part in the classroom to help the university achieve its equity goals.

It is always a priority for me to give my students the same opportunities and fair treatment. This means that I am constantly aware of unconscious bias - when preconceived ideas based on gender or racial stereotypes affect an instructor’s expectations and evaluation of a student’s work. I take action against it by getting to know my students better than only by names and grades, by giving each one plenty of opportunities to participate in class and interact with the others, and by debating with other teachers about whether they notice their own biases and are working on fixing them. I found that something as simple as requesting input from different students during class and keeping track of who are the most or least engaged is enough to shape my mental image of each according to their merits in the course, and not according to any other irrelevant or imagined aspects.

Group work is a staple of my teaching style. Sometimes I also ask students to present work at the board. But when coaxing a student into participating in these activities and asking questions during lecture or office hours, there is a fine balance between respecting their unwillingness to speak out and encouraging them to do it. Their reservedness may stem from insecurities and fear of judgment that can be alleviated by engaging more: maybe it’s the English language, maybe they feel intimidated by their more vocal colleagues, maybe they don’t see themselves as equally capable of learning. I have observed students grow more confident over the course of a semester through their increased participation in my classes, especially by problem-solving in small groups. I am happy knowing that this will help them face those same fears in the outside world as well.

Very often, embracing diversity means paying attention to small detail. In 2017, I created a combinatorial problem for a Probability exam involving a store manager distributing products to employees, and for no particular reason I made the manager a female - I used the phrase her employees. A student of mine later praised me for this choice. It caught her attention for being unusual in her experience with other exams. This episode opened my eyes to how even the smallest triviality can end up reinforcing the culture of discrimination. I had never paid attention to the gender of my own nameless characters in fictional exam problems. Since then, I make a point to always include a mixture of hes and shes, or the genderless variations of they, because I now have evidence that these details stay in my students’ minds.

I am committed to continue enforcing the respect for diversity values in Academia and supporting equity initiatives for it. Regardless of where my career takes me, I know that this is the only way to make sure that students can enjoy the same benefits from my class, from their university, and from society.