Inspiring Greatness in Students

Principle One: Believe in Them
Believing in students involves sizing up their abilities and interests and assessing how far these could take them in the future if they are developed, honed, and disciplined. Having someone that they respect express confidence in what they could do in time provides the impetus for them to stretch themselves toward new goals of personal excellence.

Principle Two: Give Them Early Chances
All great people were once young and immature, made mistakes, and embarrassed their mentors. But the greatness eventually achieved made the clumsiness along the way worth the effort of getting there.

Principle Three: View Them Through the Lens of Time
I try to challenge students with a sense of "destiny." The student may not ever achieve what I envision – and whether or not the student ever does is not important. But what I do want to do is to encourage students not to sell themselves short of their destinies. I want them to think in terms of all they can do and be.

Principle Four: Be Genuine with Them
Students know. They can tell if you are being fakely or just trying out some sort of motivational spin. Believing in students, giving them chances, and viewing them through the lens of time needs to be part of who I am as a person. It is an expression of my being – not simply an exercise or experiment I am trying on students. Inspiring students to greatness has to be something that you genuinely and deeply believe in as a person.

Principle Five: Take Time During Teachable Moments
Inspiring greatness takes time. It takes a lot of time. Students need me at inconvenient times. I am forced to prioritize these demands on my time and forced to make the choices on the spot without the luxury of time to think and analyze.

Principle Six: You Cannot Inspire Everyone to Greatness
Not all my students are destined to be great. This is not to say that all students do not have tremendous future potentials. They do. But not all will become great. In my own experience, there is no real science to it. If there is a remote pattern, however, I would say that in all cases a certain "goodness of fit" occurs between me and the student. So inspire students to greatness! You may not be able to do it for all; but the ones for whom you do it will be worth investing your life in higher education. It has been for me, and I have only been at it for a decade.

Adapted from article by Michael W. Firmin, Cedarville College in "The Teaching Professor"