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On Behalf Of Center for Faculty Innovation
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Allochtonen

by James W. Ward

I was raised Roman Catholic in rural southeastern North Carolina. I was a part of a religious minority there. Sometimes differences would become salient. Sometimes I faced outright prejudice. Now, when I introduce myself to students in the religion classes I teach at JMU, I talk about how these experiences likely contributed to my interest in studying religion. In particular, I have long been interested in individual and collective identity formation as well as [ingroup and outgroup](#) formation.

Of course, religious identity is just one of many social identities we may hold. Where I grew up, I felt like an “outsider” for many reasons, not just religious. Group identities can also be ambivalent. We may be unsure whether we are a part of a group or even if we want to be. To be honest, if my 18-year-old self had visited JMU now, I would have felt too much like an outsider to even apply. Not because of religious identity, but because of my perception of the socioeconomic position my family would have to have for me to “belong” at JMU. Why bring this up in a Teaching Toolbox? Well, sense of [belonging](#) has been correlated not just to college application, but also to retention (the theme of [our QEP](#)), to pursuing a specific course of study, to academic success, to a profession later on, and to mental health.

Human beings are profoundly social. A sense of belonging, of inclusion, or of exclusion, can have powerful effects. In a [Teaching Toolbox about Ramadan, and religion in the classroom](#), Emily Gravett recommended we be approachable to our students. Some in higher ed have even taken approachability on as a new [faculty development project](#). I also recommend, and try to embody, approachability—or [being human](#), as John Warner puts it—with some caveats I will discuss later. Across my years teaching, many students have found their way to my office to talk not just about the class, but also about their roommates, their families, their religious traditions, their sense that they do not belong at JMU, their frustrations about other classes or college more generally, and the variety of other questions that inevitably come up during the journey exploring ourselves and world that happens in college.

My interest in the role of religion in creating, sustaining, and challenging “ingroup” and outgroup” identities, in which we navigate that journey of self and world, influenced the dissertation work I did. I explored the intersections of level of secularization, level of religiosity, and attitudes toward multiculturalism in the Netherlands, as well as, more broadly, ingroup and outgroup identity formation, inter and intra group interactions, how different identities become salient, what may reduce stereotyped thinking about both ingroups and outgroups, and what may be successful in creating some sense of more expansive shared identity.

The Netherlands was an interesting site for this kind of study. When I was there in the late 1990s, one could be third generation and still be “*alloctonen*” (singular- “*allochtoon*”). You could translate this literally as something like “those from another land,” immigrants, those who are not Dutch. When it was coined, the term was not intended to be stigmatizing, but in use, it became so. My wife and I recognized that we would never be truly Dutch, even if we lived there the rest of our lives. This surprised us, given our prior assumptions about Dutch tolerance and European cosmopolitanism.

In my research, I drew heavily on the research trajectories established by Henri Tajfel’s [social identity theory](#) and Gordon Allport’s [contact hypothesis](#) theory. Tajfel argued that we tend to associate positive traits with our own ingroups and negative traits with outgroups. Allport argued that social contact could, under the right conditions, reduce ingroup and outgroup prejudices. I see these theories and ideas as relevant to teaching. Across higher education, and at JMU, there has been a push for inclusion. Many of us hope that students feel a strong sense of ingroup identity (I see the “Dukes bleed purple” sticker frequently on my students’ laptops), but also an expansive ingroup identity, in which individuals across a range of identity differences (political, ethnic, racial, religious, sex/gender orientation, ability, etc.) can feel a sense of belonging. As we think of this expansive JMU identity, how do we ourselves understand it? Is JMU an assimilating “university,” a melting pot? Is it a kind of “multiversity,” a multicultural state in the model of Canada or Belgium in which there are distinct regions (schools/majors)? Are we working on some other kind of group identity? If so, what holds this broader group identity together? I might note that, after I left the Netherlands, the Dutch government [dropped its earlier commitments to multiculturalism](#) and moved to more of an assimilation model.

In the making of this more expansive group identity, what might it mean to truly be mindful about our own sense of who might feel “*alloctonen*” and how we might attempt to facilitate that belonging? And, if we should be mindful of it, how much of our teaching and class formation should hinge on felt assessments of belonging? One conclusion I took away from my doctoral research was that multiculturalism was easy enough to describe, but much more difficult to define normatively. Part of my takeaway from the ongoing conversation around these issues at JMU, and from others across the higher education landscape, is that the normative conversations around these issues are still challenging.

The challenges around developing norms is, in part, a consequence of the complicated nature of belonging and group identities. Religious traditions have their own framings of who’s in and who’s out and conversations around identities can emerge organically in the kinds of religion classes I teach here. However, again and again, I say to students that I am over-simplifying and generalizing. What Emily [said about Islam](#) (“There are over 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. They don’t ALL do anything”) applies broadly. What is true of that religious identity is true across other group identities as well, religious or otherwise. This contributes to the challenge of arriving at consensus on the norms by which we assess inclusion and belonging.

In attempting to create inclusive learning environments, knowing a student’s group identities may not (and often does not) tell us much, if anything, about what a student may believe or do or what obstacles this individual may be experiencing to their sense of belonging or to their academic success. It is not that an

understanding of various group identities is irrelevant, but it is only a starting point (maybe). In my experience, part of what seems to help students is to speak openly about my own struggles around belonging, to help them understand that some sense of a lack of belonging (or ambivalence about belonging) is common and normal, and to explain that developing a sense of belonging can take time. I find that just a short conversation around this will lead students to come speak to me, if only to ask if I might be aware if there is a JMU group related to some interest of theirs. ([Other interventions](#), for instance, where students read about and then internalize the message that social adversity is “shared and short-lived” in college, have been shown to be effective too—especially for African American students.)

My own status as a part-time instructor poses additional complications and concerns. This status is in many ways more of an “outsider” than an insider at JMU. Though I have an office, many part-time instructors don’t have their own office. Part-time instructors typically can’t vote on departmental policies and aren’t eligible for many of the funding or leadership opportunities full-time faculty are. I try to be sensitive to what it means to feel like an outsider, and to facilitate a sense of belonging for my students, but I also try to be aware of the contractual limits of my employment and my own ill-fit with the JMU insider group. Negotiating that tension is an ongoing balancing act. There has been much discussion of the disproportionate nature of this kind of [emotional labor](#) for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ faculty. Similarly, how fair is it to ask part-time faculty to take on duties such as facilitating a felt sense of belonging, without compensating or even recognizing the costs of such labor, especially when, in many ways, we may not all feel like we truly “belong” ourselves? You might be wondering if I am fairly new to JMU, and thus understandably still feeling “allochtoon,” but I am not. I started teaching at JMU in 2001. As I have yet to navigate for myself a true sense of belonging here, in my interactions with those students who themselves feel a part of the “allochtonen,” my goal is a bit more humble than nurturing some felt sense of belonging. I hope that in my interaction with them they will feel less alone.

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To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, please contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). We always appreciate a conversation with context for feedback. For additional information about the CFI’s Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit [our webpage](#).