

Gravett – Teaching and Learning Statement

I teach religion at James Madison University (JMU), a soon-to-be-R2 public institution in Virginia that primarily serves about 20,000 undergraduates. Despite advances over the years, and despite the remarkably diverse city surrounding us, JMU is still a relatively homogenous place (e.g., it is a PWI), and it still struggles to create environments that feel inclusive of everyone, as evidenced by a recent campus climate study. The Department of Philosophy and Religion is small, and, though we perform heavy lifting for our General Education curriculum, our number of majors is modest. Most of the students who take our courses, even in upper levels, are doing so to fulfill other requirements.

As a teacher in this context, it's my responsibility to support student belonging, engagement, and growth. Through many different means, I communicate that I care about my students as whole people; I want everyone to feel welcome and valued. I routinely receive comments on my course evaluations like the following: "Emily Gravett is the best professor I have had at JMU. She is so interested in the content and makes everyone else in the class become interested and passionate as well. I learned so much in this class and it was so refreshing to have a professor that genuinely cares about her students, their mental health, and overall wellbeing. She also did a great job of making our class feel like a family." Together, the students and I develop a set of community norms to guide our time together and I get to know students individually in multiple ways (e.g., they fill out a "getting to know you" questionnaire as an initial assignment). I also create many different activities in and out of class (e.g., weekly reflections) to help them connect their lives to the material we're studying.

Since not all students are intrinsically motivated to take my courses, we spend a great deal of time, especially at the beginning, considering why studying religion is important at all. We talk, for instance, about Stephen Prothero's argument—that, in order to be effective citizens, we have to be religiously literate. I also ask students to discover additional reasons on their own. I expose them to, and ask them to reflect on, various instances in which religion intersects with politics, international relations, pop culture, literature, art, and many other aspects of their lives, whether they're religious or not. I also want them to understand how the study of religion can support their own development and skills, from critical thinking to empathy. Out of every GenEd course I teach, students go on to become religion majors, convinced this is a worthwhile area of study.

As part of this approach, prioritizing access is essential. When possible, I don't require students to purchase pricy textbooks; rather, I create a syllabus full of free materials, such as journal articles, videos, blog posts, news stories, tweets, and more. Simply because students attend JMU doesn't mean that they can afford all sorts of other stuff. I also draw upon the spirit of Universal Design to create many entry points and paths toward success. The students' final course grade is not dependent on just a few of the same type of assignment (i.e., a midterm and a final); rather, there are always many ways to demonstrate what they've learned. I am open to alternative forms of assignments too (e.g., the final research project doesn't have to be a paper, so long as it fulfills the objectives of the assignment). I do my best to be proactive in creating access. For example, I have experimented with a rotating note-taker assignment, so that students with disabilities don't need to request this accommodation because notes are being taken and shared with everyone, regardless. Everything in my classes is as transparent as possible (following Mary-Ann Winkelmes's TILT research); there isn't a "hidden" curriculum that disadvantages certain students (e.g., first-gen). One simple example is that I now call my office hours "student hours," since many students don't realize "office hours" are intended for them.

In order to design my syllabi, I determine what I want students to know or do by the end of the course and then sequence experiences to help them get there. The point is to invite students on a learning journey and to lay out the tools and checkpoints they will need to succeed. I am convinced by the evidence in favor of “active learning,” so my classes are very hands-on: students brainstorm together, discuss questions with a partner, write for reflection, respond to polls, look up information online, watch videos, and more. It is very difficult to be disengaged. In one class period, for example, I ask students to read a brief piece that introduces the concept of “privilege” through right-handedness—a relatively easy, even silly, topic. We then use this reading as a springboard for exploration of more difficult privileges (e.g., reading through White or Christian privilege lists online); personal reflective writing (e.g., what are some instances of privilege in your own life?); and a larger group debrief. Students report how eye-opening this activity is. It also comes up in later discussions and writing activities, even reflective portions of the exams, when they describe their increased self-awareness and the ways it has impacted how they relate to others in their lives.

I intentionally situate myself as a co-learner in this journey with my students, modeling that it’s okay to share, make mistakes, and grow. One of students’ favorite moments is when I show them a published article of mine... as well as the peer-review comments I received before publication, including from one reviewer who didn’t think the article had a point! Even professionals are constantly learning and improving. I ask students for frequent feedback on my teaching, and I always adjust my instruction based on their concerns, confusions, and suggestions. This ongoing dialogue represents the kind of instructor I aim to be, at JMU and in our field—responsive, caring, open, in real relationship with the people I teach.