Great Conversation

An integrated sequence of five courses taken over two years, the Great Conversation introduces students to the major epochs of Western tradition through direct encounters with significant works. Beginning with the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, the program traces the development of literary and artistic expression, philosophy, religious belief, and historical reflection through the centuries, extending into the modern world. Students respond to great works, challenging the ideas expressed in them and challenging their own ideas as well, thus joining the conversation of men and women through the ages about the perennial issues of human life.

The Great Conversation is open to students of all interests. This program appeals to those who like to read, discuss, and write about ideas; those who believe that learning about the past is profoundly relevant to understanding the present; those who want to examine the Western tradition in a unified way; and those who believe that an education ought to cultivate discriminating minds, inquisitive spirits, and moral sensitivity.

The faculty members who teach a Great Conversation cohort remain with the students through the courses in the standard sequence (Great Conversation 113-218), as fellow participants in the conversation. Students in the Great Conversation live in the same residence hall their first year and enjoy eating meals together, attending films and theater, and going on field trips throughout the program.

Intended Learning Outcomes for the Program

Admission to the Program

Students are invited to apply to the Great Conversation program after they are admitted to the college. Selection is based on an essay whose topic is announced in the application form. Each year the faculty of the Great Conversation choose 120 first-year students to participate in the program, dividing them into two cohorts, each with 60 students.

Course Equivalents for General Education Requirements

By successfully completing courses GCON 113-GCON 218 of the Great Conversation, a student fulfills the following General Education requirements:

- Biblical and Theological Studies-Bible [BTS-B] (one course)
- First-Year Writing [FYW] (one course)
- Historical Studies in Western Culture [HWC] (two courses)
- Artistic Studies [ALS-A] (one course)
- Literary Studies [ALS-L] (one course)
- Courses with Writing [WRI] (three courses)
- Oral Communication [ORC] (one course)

Courses

GCON 113-GCON 218 are offered only to first-year students and sophomores enrolled in the Great Conversation. Great Conversation students must take these courses in sequence. Enrollment in subsequent courses is contingent upon successful completion of all prior courses in the sequence.

GCON 113: The Tradition Beginning: The Greeks and the Hebrews

Students contrast the world views of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews: Greek polytheism and the hero with the Hebrew notion of one God and the believer; Greek notions of civic community and earthly life with the Hebrew ideal of a religious covenant and historical destiny; Greek thoughts about beauty, war, peace, justice, politics, metaphysics, art, architecture, and drama with the prophetic stance toward the past and the future. Students read and discuss works by Homer, Sappho, Thucydides, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, the writers of the Hebrew scripture, and the artistry of the Parthenon. Offered annually in the fall semester. Counts toward ancient studies major.

Prerequisite: GCON 113.

GCON 115: The Tradition Redefined: The Medieval Synthesis

This course pursues the expansion of Christianity throughout the Roman world and the synthesis of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman thought in the early Middle Ages. Students consider the development of a unified world view as expressed in religious devotions, philosophy, literature, and art and in monasticism and feudalism in Church and Empire. Students discuss works by Augustine, Benedict, Hildegard of Bingen, Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, and Christine de Pisan, medieval drama, and the artistry of Chartres Cathedral. Offered annually in the spring semester. Counts toward medieval studies major.

Prerequisites: GCON 113 and GCON 115.

GCON 217: The Tradition Renewed: New Forces of Secularization

Students examine the Renaissance's return to classical values and the Reformation's return to early Christian attitudes which challenge the authority of the medieval synthesis. Students trace the development of new sources of authority including the new science with its influence on art, literature, politics, and philosophy. Discussions consider writers and artists such as Luther, Calvin, Michelangelo, Teresa of Avila, Caravaggio, Shakespeare, Descartes, Milton, Rembrandt, Aphra Behn, Locke, Bach, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Goethe. Offered annually in the fall semester.

Prerequisites: GCON 113, GCON 115, and GCON 116.
GCON 218: The Tradition in Crisis: Dissenters and Defenders

Revolutionary changes occurred in economics, politics, philosophy, aesthetics, and women’s roles at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Students consider the development of modern social and natural sciences and examine various attempts to restate the Western tradition in the face of continuing intellectual and social transformations. Students discuss writers and artists such as Burke, Paine, David, Wollstonecraft, Shelley, Mill, Beethoven, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Darwin, Marx, Ibsen, Freud, Nietzsche, Woolf, Proust, Niebuhr, King, and Picasso. Offered annually in the spring semester.

Prerequisites: GCON 113, GCON 115, GCON 116, and GCON 217.

GCON 280: What is Europe? The Grand Tour, National Museums, & European Identity

This course critically engages the notion of European identity by exploring the idea of the Grand Tour and the emergence of national museums. Students will experience firsthand some of the sites, artifacts, and works of art encountered in the Great Conversation program and reflect on the ways in which the program, like the Grand Tour itself, delineates cultural borders as well as disrupts them. Offered alternate years during Interim.

Prerequisite: completion of GCON 217 or permission of the instructor.

GCON 310: Ethical Issues & Normative Perspectives: Great Conversation Continued

This course examines ethical issues from perspectives that are contemporary expressions of or reactions to classic normative traditions covered in the two-year sequence of the Great Conversation program. Included among these are one or more contemporary representatives of the Christian theological tradition. Among the possible ethical issues considered are political morality, sexuality, gender, matters of life and death (war, euthanasia, abortion), economic justice, and environmental responsibility. Offered alternate years.

Prerequisites: completion of GCON 218 and BTS-T, or permission of the instructor.

Faculty

Director, 2018-2019
Douglas J. Casson
Associate Professor of Political Science
political philosophy; constitutional law

Anthony Bateza
Assistant Professor of Religion
Reformation studies

Patricia Z. Beckman
Associate Professor of Practice in Religion
Christian mysticism; history of Christianity; women and religions

David Booth
Associate Professor of Religion
history of theology; philosophy and psychology of religion; feminist theology; theology and sexuality

Hilary J. Bouxsein
Visiting Assistant Professor of Classics
Greek poetry; classical languages and literature

Karen Cherewatuk
Professor of English
old English; middle English; Arthurian literature; Caribbean literature; medieval European tradition

Jeannine Grenberg
Professor of Philosophy
ethics; Kant; history of modern philosophy

Steven C. Hahn
Professor of History
colonial America; Native American history; piracy

Danny Munoz-Hutchinson
Associate Professor of Philosophy
ancient philosophy; philosophy in late antiquity; philosophy of mind; Zen Buddhism

Bjorn Nordfjord
Visiting Associate Professor of English
American cinema; world cinema; crime fiction; adaptation and narrative theory

Mary E. Trull
Professor of English
16th- and 17th-century English literature

Charles A. Wilson
Professor of Religion
theology

Paul Zorn
Professor of Mathematics, Statistics, and Computer Science
complex analysis; mathematical exposition