

FIRST-YEAR CONVERSATION PROGRAMS  
AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES



ST. OLAF COLLEGE

# THE ART OF CONVERSATION

**Conversation and interdisciplinary inquiry are at the heart of a St. Olaf education.** We want students to develop the ability to listen carefully, argue forcefully, and be the kind of engaged thinker who makes a conversation more interesting.

St. Olaf's signature Conversation programs are interdisciplinary, team-taught explorations that take students on five distinct intellectual journeys through some of the influential texts and ideas that have shaped our past and will guide our future. Students in each first-year Conversation program live in the same residence hall and learn as a cohort.

Programs for first-year students explore the origins and development of Western civilization, the formation and ideals of America's national culture, and the ethos of environmentalism. A Conversation program exploring Asian cultures begins with first-year language study and continues during the sophomore year.

First-year students with a passion for scientific inquiry find a learning community of like-minded thinkers in the Integrated Introduction to Chemistry and Biology (CHBI) course sequence, or in the Science Conversation, a program available to students during the sophomore year.

Students drawn to the Conversations and to the CHBI learning community have an insatiable curiosity, eagerly engage in discussion, and have a passion for learning that is not easily quenched.



# THE GREAT CONVERSATION

The Great Conversation is designed for students interested in exploring the cultural legacy of Western civilization through the influential books and works of art that have informed and inspired people through the ages. Great Con is for students who believe that learning about the past is profoundly relevant to understanding the present, for students who want to examine the Western tradition in a unified way, and for students who believe that an education ought to cultivate discriminating minds, inquisitive spirits, and moral sensitivity.

The Great Conversation is a liberal arts education in full, incorporating literature, history, philosophy, religion, and the arts from many points of view. The reading is far-reaching, the pace intense, and the class discussions forceful. The discipline and skills developed through Great Con benefit all scholarly paths and for the past three decades have prepared students for professional experiences ranging from social work to teaching to law and medicine.

## COURSES

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

Great Con opens with an exploration of the worldviews of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, from Greek polytheism to the Hebrew notion of one God and the believer, exploring ideas of civic community, beauty, war, peace, justice, politics, metaphysics, art, architecture, and drama.

### **GCON 115: The Tradition Continuing: The Romans and the Christians**

The Greek tradition is transformed in Roman society, as Hebrew thought is in Christian scripture. Students explore the intersection of Roman epic, drama, lyric poetry, history, and stoic philosophy, with the gospels and writings of early Christian theologians.

### **GCON 116: The Tradition Redefined: The Medieval Synthesis**

Students explore the expansion of Christianity throughout the Roman world and the synthesis of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman thought in the Middle Ages.

### **GCON 217: The Tradition Renewed: New Forces of Secularization**

The Renaissance's return to classical values and the Reformation's return to early Christian attitudes challenge the authority of the medieval synthesis, leading to revolutions in art, literature, politics, and philosophy.

### **GCON 218: The Tradition in Crisis: Dissenters and Defenders**

Dramatic changes in economics, politics, philosophy, aesthetics, and women's roles emerge at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, stimulating various attempts to restate the Western tradition in the face of continuing intellectual and social transformations in the 19th and early 20th centuries.



MELCHERT **THE GREAT CONVERSATION** OXFORD  
A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY FIFTH EDITION

# AMERICAN CONVERSATIONS

American Conversations — AmCon — is an interdisciplinary learning community interested in exploring the complex political, social, and cultural history of the United States. The materials studied and the emphasis on writing, oral communication skills, and advanced critical thinking prepare you for the further study of history, literature, the arts, political thought, and diversity of many kinds (including class, race, ethnicity, and gender).

Martin Luther King, Jr. thought “the function of education [should be] to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education.” This dream lies at the core of AmCon, which not only looks closely at America’s history, culture, values, and role in the world, but also helps students explore and practice engaged citizenship — regardless of the country they happen to call home.

## COURSES

### **AMCON 101: Declaring Independence: 1607-1865**

From the founding of the colonies to the Civil War, America has wrestled with questions of identity. What is an American? Students explore the institutions, images, and stories of European Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans, tracing how the meaning of our stories and myths changed between the colonial period and today.

### **AMCON 102: Democratic Vistas, 1800-1900**

In this century of institutional development, national expansion, and sectional conflict, Americans continued to define a national identity. Students probe the ways in which region, religion, race, ethnicity, and gender inform individual and group contributions to the conversation.

### **AMCON 201: Remaking America, 1865-1945**

Burgeoning cities and industrialism, an emerging market economy, changing opportunities for women, an influx of immigrants, and the migration of African Americans to urban centers — all opened questions of freedom of expression, distribution of resources, and American identity.

### **AMCON 202: Pursuits of Happiness, 1920-Present**

Backtracking slightly in history, students examine the emergence of the mass market and consumerism, and the increasingly complex relations between identity and material goods. Students examine America during the Cold War and its aftermath through the images, institutions, and stories of environmental, feminist, and Civil Rights activists.



WORDS WORTH CLASSICS

# The Great Gatsby

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD



Major goals of this course: ...

What is a cult classic film? What comes one film to become wildly successful beyond ...

other films? Have any ...

course will provide ...

today, scrutiny ...

techniques of ...

can we learn ...

Reasons why ...

The ...

a space for ...

have a space ...

would be ...

course ...

film production ...

making ...

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# ENVIRONMENTAL CONVERSATIONS

Environmental issues are a major concern of public policy and a profound influence on our daily lives. Environmental Conversations — EnCon — is a learning community exploring questions of environmental policy, science, and values. EnCon is organized around two required first-year courses (one each in writing and religion), and an interdisciplinary Introduction to Environmental Studies course designed for EnCon students. Through these courses and co-curricular opportunities, EnCon prepares students to think about moral, scientific, and practical dimensions of human relationships with the rest of nature. They become part of a larger community of students who seek to think clearly and responsibly about environmental policy, sustainability, and “the moral ecology of everyday life.”

EnCon students will have opportunities to engage in student-led sustainability initiatives, and learn about environmental questions and opportunities facing the college — from the student-run STOGROW farm to the college wind turbine and planned solar farm. Through the Piper Center for Vocation and Career, motivated students may also create academic civic engagement programs that complement their EnCon work.

## COURSES

### **ENVST 137: Introduction to Environmental Studies**

Because most environmental problems involve issues beyond the sciences, students examine the economic, political, and ethical dimensions of environmental questions and environmental decision-making.

### **WRITING 111: Doing Democracy: The Politics of Food**

Students explore practical and philosophical aspects of food consumption and distribution, questioning why certain communities experience obesity and abundance while others suffer from starvation and lack.

### **WRITING 111: The Nature of Nature Writing**

Students read a variety of nature writers (Thoreau, Dillard, McKibben, Pollan, Farrell, Carson, Berry, Hass, Harjo, and Basho) and consider how those writers incite change in their readers.

Students write in a variety of styles, including personal essay, a sustainability manifesto, observations, and a researched article on a “natural” issue.

### **RELIGION 121: Land, Food, and Justice in Biblical Traditions**

Food is prominent in biblical narratives and offers a useful interpretative lens for understanding the Bible, both in the context of the cultures that wrote it and in the context of contemporary discussions of sustainability.

### **RELIGION 121: Gardens and Wilderness: The Bible and the Idea of Nature**

Using the biblical imagery of gardens and wilderness as a way of thinking about the natural world, students explore what biblical authors thought about nature, and how people in contemporary society employ the Bible in arguments about the environment.



# ASIAN CONVERSATIONS

Asian Conversations offers students a dynamic cultural exploration that begins with two semesters of language study (Chinese or Japanese) during a student's first year, taken with a First-Year Writing course, a First-Year Religion course, and four elective courses (two each semester). Asian Con students continue their language study during their sophomore year, as they embark on the three-course Asian Conversations exploration of the history and culture of an increasingly important part of the world.

Asian Conversations follows "Journeys Through Asia," a theme that captures both the content of the course and the opportunity for students to explore China and Japan during the Interim of their sophomore year. Readings include historic and contemporary narratives of Asian travelers, pilgrims, and migrants. Through these stories, students examine the range of communities and boundaries that have shaped Asia's political, economic, cultural, linguistic, and environmental communities. Throughout, students explore Asian interpretations of the human condition from a variety of religious, philosophical, and literary perspectives.

## COURSES

*Courses are in addition to Chinese or Japanese language study.*

### **ASIAN 210: Asian Conversations I: Mapping Journeys**

How do pilgrims, travelers, and migrants make sense of their journeys in Asia? Students explore maps, histories, tales, and guides that define Asia in the past and present, including how cultural, linguistic, economic, religious, social, and political connections and divisions create and sustain communities in Asia.

### **ASIAN 215: Asian Conversations II: Experiencing Asia**

Students and faculty travel together to study in Japan and China during Interim. Guided fieldwork experiences strengthen students' skills in their respective languages. Through readings, site visits, and local interviews, students reflect on their experience of Asia and their understanding of how ordinary people construct "Asian" culture and society today.

### **ASIAN 220: Asian Conversations III: Interpreting Journeys**

Having looked at how people journey through Asia, the final course considers how ideas journey over time and space. Students examine a range of interpretations of Asia, including spiritual, literary, philosophical, and linguistic ideas.



# INTEGRATED INTRODUCTION TO CHEMISTRY AND BIOLOGY

First-year students with a passion for science will find Integrated Introduction to Chemistry and Biology (CHBI, or “chubbi”) an exciting exploration of the interface of biology and chemistry. Organized as a three-course sequence for a cohort of students who stay together through all three courses, CHBI forms a learning community of students and faculty who work together to master the fundamentals of chemistry and cellular biology. The interrelatedness of these disciplines is emphasized through biological applications of fundamental chemistry and through the exploration of chemical principles found in biological phenomena. As a learning community, students and faculty explore ideas in classrooms and labs, through group-based problem solving, and through discussion and study groups. In addition to basic texts, readings from a variety of sources illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of science.

This unique interdisciplinary community approach to learning prepares students for more specialized courses by developing sound disciplinary practices, inquisitive habits, and the flexibility to draw on ideas from multiple sources.

## COURSES

### **CH/BI 125: Integrated Chem/Bio I: Chemical Concepts with Biological Applications**

This course introduces chemical concepts that are important for students pursuing a study of chemistry or biology. Topics include atomic structure, the periodic table, bonding interactions within and between particles, water and its solutions, biological membranes, chemical reaction types, chemical stoichiometry, equilibrium systems, acids and bases, and introduction to protein structure. Examples are often pulled from the realm of biological molecules and processes.

### **CH/BI 126: Integrated Chem/Bio II: Thermodynamics and Kinetics with Bio Relevance**

This course introduces physical chemistry with an emphasis on thermodynamics and kinetics of biologically relevant systems. Topics include probability as the driving force for chemical

reactions; the relationship between chemical bonding energetics, entropy, and equilibria; oxidation-reduction reactions and electrochemistry; and rates of reactions, including enzyme-catalyzed reactions. Laboratory experiments and activities illustrate lecture topics and introduce new concepts.

### **CH/BI 227: Integrated Chem/Bio III: Molecular and Cellular Biology**

This course builds on the principles learned in Chemistry/Biology 125/126 and explores how chemistry informs major principles of cellular and molecular biology. Topics include cell structure, metabolism, movement, signaling, and division. The course emphasizes problem-solving, quantitative reasoning, the scientific method, and scientific writing through lectures, discussions, readings, writing assignments, and lab work. Students attend three classes and one three-hour laboratory each week.



# NAVIGATING THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

## **A St. Olaf education is based on the breadth of a robust General Education (GE) program and the depth of strong majors.**

GE courses ensure students develop a broad range of skills and general knowledge. Two of the most important skills developed through a liberal arts education are critical thinking and persuasive writing. First-Year Writing and First-Year Religion classes sharpen and test these skills.

### **First-Year Writing**

Writing is a primary means of learning at St. Olaf. Through a variety of writing courses, students read, research, discuss, and write about significant issues specific to the academic themes of a course. First-Year Writing courses span the disciplines and are an integral part of each Conversation program.

Even strong high school writers are challenged by the dynamic interplay of writing and learning. Papers are often workshopped and critiqued, revised and rewritten, and then revised again. Through the process, students learn to make their arguments more persuasive and their writing clear.

### **First-Year Religion**

All St. Olaf students take two courses in Biblical and Theological Studies. Many students satisfy the first course requirement through a Conversation program course; others by taking a First-Year Religion course, *The Bible in Culture and Community*. This course is offered from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and is taught in thematic sections using the Bible as the primary text.

The themes of first-year religion courses touch on a wide range of subjects and focus on varied historical periods, looking at Biblical ideas and language through the lenses of the humanities and social sciences. Each course offers a dialogue between biblical traditions and the cultures and communities related to the theme.

### **Learning in Community**

One of the most powerful features of the Conversation programs and the CHBI learning community is the bond that develops among students and faculty. Each cohort of first-year Conversation students lives in the same residence hall, helping build strong friendships and ensuring that lively conversations continue long after class. The CHBI cohort does not live in the same residence hall, but long hours in the lab together create strong relationships.

Faculty in the Conversations and in CHBI approach their teaching as a team, from planning joint classes, presentations, and events, to thoughtful integration of material from each professor's area of expertise. The idea is that just as the materials draw freely on a variety of disciplinary perspectives, classroom dynamics, field trips, performances, and after-hours discussions range widely. With a deliberately interdisciplinary faculty, a student cohort that remains together through the entire program, and a shared residential or travel experience (in the Conversations), each program is an extended learning experience for students and faculty alike.



## Sophomore Conversation Program: The Science Conversation

Designed for students in the sophomore year, the three-course Science Conversation — Science Con — brings together students and faculty with a broad range of academic interests for a critical exploration of science within its historical, cultural, and social contexts. The linked courses encourage a philosophically and theologically informed appreciation of the development of science, the relationship between reason and faith, questions of meaning and purpose, and the complex interplay of science and society. It is designed to illuminate the distinctive character of science and its relevance to the challenges facing our world.

## Junior-Senior Conversation Program: The Public Affairs Conversation

The yearlong Public Affairs Conversation (open to juniors and seniors) is an interdisciplinary exploration of American public policy. Through two courses (fall and spring) and a paid internship (in Interim or summer), students focus on contested ideals and contemporary controversies in American public affairs. Through intense discussions, students and faculty learn and practice the nearly lost art of civil disagreement. The first semester examines the debates that established the foundations of modern American political thought. The second semester analyzes and reflects on some of the contentious issues in current American politics. Internships will offer students the opportunity to apply their learning in law firms, policy organizations, think tanks, and other for- and nonprofit organizations.

## Applying to the Conversation and CHBI Programs

Application to the Conversation and CHBI programs is made after a student has been admitted to St. Olaf College. Admission to the individual programs is competitive. Students may apply to multiple programs, but will only be

able to participate in one of the first-year programs, or the language courses of Asian Conversations.

**Information about the application process and the selection criteria is available after March 15 each year.**

