

## Great Conversation

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wp.stolaf.edu/great-conversation (<http://wp.stolaf.edu/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** (<http://wp.stolaf.edu/curriculum-committee/the-great-conversation-program-ilos>)

### 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.

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

Students explore the Greek and Hebrew legacies in Roman society and in the New Testament, discussing various attempts to find personal fulfillment in political life, in stoicism and Epicureanism, and in the teachings of Christ and St. Paul. Students read works by Cicero, Horace, Virgil, Epictetus, the writers of Christian scripture and study the artistry of Roman portraiture. Offered during Interim. Counts toward ancient studies major.

**Prerequisite:** GCON 113.

### **GCON 116: *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 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, 2016-2017****Douglas J. Casson**

Associate Professor of Political Science  
political philosophy; constitutional law

**Patricia Z. Beckman**

Assistant Professor of Religion  
Christian mysticism; history of Christianity; women and religions

**Gary C. Gisselman**

Artist in Residence in Theater  
directing; musical theater

**Jeanine Grenberg**

Professor of Philosophy  
ethics; Kant; history of modern philosophy

**Anne H. Groton**

Professor of Classics  
Greek and Roman drama; classical languages and literature

**James S. Hanson**

Associate Professor of Religion  
New Testament

**Peder J. Jøthen**

Assistant Professor of Religion  
religious ethics

**Kevin Mummey**

Visiting Assistant Professor of History  
medieval Europe; Spain

**Bjorn Nordfjord**

Visiting Associate Professor of English

American cinema; world cinema; crime fiction; adaptation and narrative theory

**Steve T. Reece**

Professor of Classics  
Greek and Roman epic; classical languages and literature

**Anthony J. Rudd**

Associate Professor of Philosophy  
epistemology; philosophy of mind; Wittgenstein; Kierkegaard; existentialism