

Conversation Partner Program Handbook



EASTERN
MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

OFFICE *of* INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Conversation Partner Program

The purpose of the Conversation Partner Program at Eastern Michigan University is twofold. For international students, it's a chance to meet American students, practice conversational English skills and learn about American culture. For native English-speaking students, it's an opportunity to meet someone from another country and a different culture. Both students will get a chance to gain cross-cultural communication skills and practice using a second language.

The Conversation Partner Program is completely voluntary. Many students have found the experience to be very rewarding, and we hope you do too!

Here are comments from previous participants:

- *"...I have wonderful friends that I wouldn't trade for anything - they are some of the coolest, most amazing people I know. I would take three conversation partners at once if I could!"*
- *"Having a conversation partner has really opened my eyes not only to another country, but also to my own."*
- *"I had and I still have great time with Eliot, my English partner... My English has been improving since I used this program."*

My partner's name: _____

My partner's contact information: _____

What are the expectations of a Conversation Partner?

- By applying to the Conversation Partner Program, **you are committing to meet with your conversation partner for at least one hour each week** for the duration of the semester. If for any reason, you are unable to fulfill this commitment, you must contact the Office of International Students as soon as possible so that your partner can be reassigned.
- You are expected to meet with your partner throughout the semester for which you applied. You will meet with your partner at a time and location that is mutually convenient. If, for some reason, you must cancel or reschedule your meeting, it is your responsibility to contact your partner to inform them.
- You are expected to speak in English for at least half of the time that you spend with your partner.
- Being a conversation partner is a give-and-take process. Both parties are responsible for facilitating and maintaining conversations during meetings.
- You are expected to follow the policies in the Student Code of Conduct.
- **Contact the Office of International Students if any problems develop during your meetings:**

Office of International Students
244 Student Center
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
Eastern Michigan University
Phone: (734) 487-3116
Fax: (734) 487-0303
Email: ois@emich.edu

What do I do at the first meeting?

- For your first meeting, it may be preferable to meet on-campus so that both you and your partner can feel comfortable and familiar with your surroundings. Often, international students do not have their own vehicle, so discuss transportation before choosing a location. It is up to the two of you to decide where and when you are most comfortable meeting.
- Learn to pronounce one another's names. When you first meet your partner you may find yourself having trouble pronouncing their name, and you may even find that they have difficulty pronouncing your name. Teach your partner how to say and spell your name and ask your partner to help you say and spell their name. Write it down. Practice saying the name several times. Do not be embarrassed to ask your partner to repeat

it as many times as it takes. Your partner should not feel the need to shorten or change his or her name to make it easier for you to say.

- Discuss the best method for contacting one another (email, phone, text, social media, etc.) in the case that you must cancel your scheduled meeting.
- Bring your calendar and discuss your work and school schedules. Set up a regular day and time to meet (optional).
- Do what you normally do when getting to know someone. International students have come to school in the United States to learn more about American culture, so they expect you to act and behave according to your own customs. Keep in mind that they are in the process of learning English, so be patient and friendly and you will put your conversation partner at ease.

Helpful Hints for Successful Conversation Partnerships

- As you learn to communicate across cultures, you may find yourself outside of your comfort zone at times. This is part of the learning process. You may find that your conversation partner has different expectations for how men and women should interact, for the amount of personal space between the two of you (Americans prefer more personal space than many other cultures), or for what topics are considered appropriate. This is an opportunity to open up discussion about the differences and similarities in norms and values of your respective cultures.
- If you are unsure if something is culturally appropriate to discuss; ask. A sincere interest is usually appreciated. You can begin by saying, "I hope it's okay if I ask you..."
- *Speak at a natural pace.* If you are a fast-talker, slow down a bit, otherwise, speak at your normal pace. If you are asked to repeat something, repeat your exact words. Rephrase if there is still a misunderstanding.
- *Allow for pause time.* Americans can become uncomfortable after a pause time of only a few seconds, but pause time varies across cultures. Be patient and give your partner ample time to collect their thoughts and respond.
- *Limit your use of slang.* International students love to learn new slang, but be sure to limit your use until you are confident that your partner understands what you are saying.
- Do not overcorrect your Conversation Partner when they make mistakes. Allow your partner to finish speaking and consider comprehension over

perfection. Overcorrecting can hinder the development of fluency, so only correct errors that block communication.

- Avoid correcting homework. This will take away from time developing conversation skills. If you are willing to do this for your partner, try to do it before or after your allotted conversation time.
- Contact the Office of International Students if you would like more tips or suggestions on how to best communicate with your conversation partner.

Be Respectful

- If problems with your partnership develop and/or you are unwilling or unable to continue meeting with your partner, contact the Office of International Students immediately so that your partner can be re-paired.
- Do not use your time with your Conversation Partner to promote a personal, political, or religious agenda.
- Do not use the Conversation Partner Program as a dating service.
- As you and your partner develop trust, you may find them confiding in you about serious problems (e.g. medical, legal, landlord, or family) which you may not be qualified to handle. If this occurs, you can express your compassion, but then refer your partner to proper university services (CAPS, Snow Health Center, etc.) or contact the Office of International Students. Do not attempt to provide counseling services for your partner.
- Do not use sexually explicit and/or harassing behavior, language, or overtures. If you feel uncomfortable with a topic of conversation—for whatever reason—tell your partner that you'd rather discuss something else or simply discontinue the session. Contact the Office of International Students right away. Of course, in an emergency situation, contact EMU police or call 911.

Suggested Activities

What you choose to do in your time with your Conversation Partner is completely up to both of you. The intent is for each party to learn, share, and have fun. While you may meet your partner on campus for activities, there may also be events off campus that peak your interest. You and your conversation partner are responsible for paying your own way for any activity that you choose to do together. Most college students are on a tight budget so discuss the financial aspects of the outing before engaging in the activity. Here is a list of local places and activities that partners may enjoy during meetings together:

- Go downtown for the Ypsilanti Farmers' Market

- Visit Wiard's Cider Mill and Country Fair
- Check out one of Southeast Michigan's many museums:
 - The Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum (Ypsilanti)
 - The Ypsilanti Historical Museum (Ypsilanti)
 - The Yankee Air Museum (Belleville)
 - University of Michigan Museum of Natural History (Ann Arbor)
 - University of Michigan Museum of Art (Ann Arbor)
 - Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum (Ann Arbor)
 - The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (Dearborn)
 - Detroit's Institute of Arts (Detroit)
 - Detroit Historical Museum (Detroit)
 - Museum of Contemporary Art (Detroit)
 - Arab American National Museum (Dearborn)
 - The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (Detroit)
 - Holocaust Memorial Center (Farmington Hills)
- Go ice skating at Campus Martius Park in Detroit
- Attend an EMU home game: football, basketball, volleyball, etc.
- Visit one of Michigan's many metropolitan parks
- Volunteer together. Get involved with EMU's VISION Volunteer Center.
- Go to a comedy show at the Ann Arbor Comedy Showcase
- Enjoy the Matthaei Botanical Gardens, Ann Arbor
- Go to art festivals and gallery openings
- Have coffee at a café
- Go shopping/grocery shopping
- Have dinner at each other's homes
- Go dancing
- Exercise together at the REC/IM
- Go see a movie and discuss it afterwards
- Play outside
 - Warm weather - go hiking, biking, golfing, kayaking, canoeing, disc golfing, swimming, go to the beach, play a sport: Frisbee, volleyball, soccer
 - Winter weather - go skiing, snowboarding, sledding, ice skating, make a snowman
- Go to places of worship together to learn about each other's religion

Learning Beyond the Classroom Credit

Students who participate in the Conversation Partner Program for Learning Beyond the Classroom credit must choose and complete one of the activities below and write a 2-3 page paper reflecting upon your experiences. Consider

what you learned about your partner's culture, as well as what you learned about your own. Submit your papers to Julia Wells at jwells24@emich.edu.

Suggested Topics of Discussion

1. *Food*

Objective

Learn about daily meals and special menus for celebrations and possibly try new foods and exchange recipes.

Activities

Optional: Eat at the campus café or dining hall together.

Optional: Meet at an ethnic restaurant and sample new dishes.

Optional: Exchange a favorite recipe or home cooked dish from each other's country.

Optional: Host each other for lunch or dinner at home.

Optional: Take turns teaching one another how to cook a favorite dish

Conversation Ideas

- Discuss what food is served during a typical/traditional breakfast, lunch, and dinner.
- Find out what special foods are prepared on holidays, birthdays, weddings, etc.
- Talk about rituals, etiquette/manners, proper tipping, eating utensils, etc. associated with food.

2. *Family and Home*

Objective

Learn about family structures (nuclear or extended), values, and domestic lifestyles.

Preparation

Bring photos of friends, family, pets, hometowns, etc.

Conversation Ideas

- Share favorite memories about your family, relatives, etc.
- Talk about parents' professions, your home, your family vacations, your upbringing, etc.
- Tell each other about any pets (dog, cat, fish, bird, etc.) you or your family own.
- Discuss parenting customs in your country
- Talk about important lessons your parents taught you

3. *Sports and Recreation*

Objective

Learn about national pastimes and each other's interests and hobbies.

Activities

Optional: Bring a deck of cards or favorite board game to the session and play together.

Optional: Bring supplies needed to do a craft project.

Optional: Go to the gym and work out together.

Optional: Support EMU's athletic program by attending a sporting event together.

Optional: Watch a sporting event on television

Conversation Ideas

- Discuss what people enjoy doing as a pastime when not working or studying.
- Introduce each other to favorite hobbies and crafts (comic books, jewelry making, etc.)
- Explain the basics of popular national sports (for example, baseball vs. cricket).
- Discuss the sports you like to play and those you like to watch on TV

4. *Arts and Entertainment*

Objective

Learn about fun activities and gain insights into cultural values.

Activities

Optional: Go to a movie (or rent a DVD), play, concert, or ballet

Optional: Go to a cultural festival, art festival, or museum

Optional: Listen to music from your partner's country.

Optional: Teach each other basic steps if you plan to go out dancing.

Conversation Ideas

- Discuss stereotypes portrayed in the movies and television shows, storylines and characters, cultural values/themes, popular actors and actresses, etc.

- Compare and contrast music and dance styles in America and in your partner's country. Ask about popular singers, bands, and other entertainers.
- Talk about the symbolism of artistic designs and other creative expressions.

5. Education

Objective

Learn about educational systems, teaching methods, and transmittal of knowledge.

Conversation Ideas

- Find out what the other is studying/doing at EMU, why he/she chose his/her academic major or career field, etc.
- Talk about primary and secondary schooling, the ages when children begin their education, the length of the school day and year, teaching methods and important lessons, and preparations for college.
- American student- Inquire how your partner learned English and about the US.
- International student- Inquire how Americans typically learn about the world and other languages.
- Share success tips on studying.

6. Travel and Transportation

Objective

Learn about geography and gain insights into tourism.

Preparation

Bring an atlas or maps of the world, USA, Michigan, and partner's country
Share travel photos or brochures.

Conversation Ideas

- International student- Show on the world map which routes you traveled to get to the US and explain how you prepared yourself to come.
- American student- Point out in the map of Michigan the location of the Upper Peninsula and your favorite places to visit in the state and in neighboring states.
- Tell each other which places (countries and/or states) you have toured and visited.
- Make suggestions for spring break travel or plans for vacations during other school breaks.

7. Holidays

Objective

Learn about special days throughout the year and how they are celebrated by law or custom.

Preparation

Bring a current 12-month calendar to the session.

Optional: Invite each other to celebrate a special holiday

Optional: Carve a pumpkin, go to a haunted house, decorate a Christmas tree, etc.

Conversation Ideas

- Compare and contrast common holidays (New Year, Valentine's Day, etc.) each month.
- Discuss other special days, such as legal holidays, religious celebrations, etc.

Holidays in the United States

The following are legal holidays when government offices and many businesses are closed and classes may be suspended.

- *New Year's Day*, January 1
- *Martin Luther King Day*, Third Monday in January
- *President's Day*, Second Monday of February
- *Easter*, Date varies in March or April
- *Memorial Day*, Last Monday in May
- *Independence Day*, July 4
- *Labor Day*, First Monday in September
- *Columbus Day*, Second Monday in October
- *Veterans Day*, November 11
- *Election Day*, Tuesday after first Monday in November
- *Thanksgiving*, Fourth Thursday in November
- *Christmas*, December 25

We wish you a rewarding experience as a Conversation Partner!

Remember, at any time, you may contact the Office of International Students for advice, suggestions or other matters related to the Conversation Partner Program.

This handbook was prepared with the help of:

Cortney Cain at William and Mary College:

<http://www.wm.edu/as/graduate/graduatecenter/conversation/index.php>

Colorado State University:

<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/esl/conversation.cfm>

Humboldt State University:

<http://users.humboldt.edu/sjohn/partner.html>

University of Iowa:

<http://clas.uiowa.edu/files/esl/Conversation%20Topics.pdf>