

Converse University
Quality Enhancement Plan

*Converse Across Boundaries:
Learning Through Diverse Experiences*

Executive Summary

As a historic women’s institution, Converse was founded on an ideal of providing an environment of tolerance, pluralism, and informed social engagement: the “Founder’s Ideal,” a statement of guiding purpose adopted by trustees in 1889, expresses a commitment to cultivating in students the ability to “act justly,” to participate in the well-being of their country, and to embracing differences “liberally and tolerantly.” In this spirit—and inspired by the institutional core values of diversity, exploration, and community—Converse’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), *Converse Across Boundaries: Learning Through Diverse Experiences*, focuses on enhancing student learning by fostering the skills to engage with and dialogue about diverse cultures, perspectives, and life experiences. In this way, *Converse Across Boundaries* equips graduates with the ability both to “converse” (i.e. communicate) across social boundaries, and to appreciate what may be the “converse” to their own background (in the logical sense of seeing something in an unfamiliar order, and in the semantic sense of a difference which is complementary).

Converse Across Boundaries represents an integration of existing and new initiatives and programs. In the classroom, students take core courses dedicated issues of cultural diversity, diverse social perspectives, or the experiences of non-mainstream or marginalized social groups. As one specific dimension of such diversity, the QEP also supports an Interfaith Studies program with both curricular and co-curricular components that celebrate the religious diversity of the region and broaden knowledge of diverse faiths and worldviews. Outside the classroom, the QEP sponsors a series of campus events and activities in which students occupy or are exposed to roles or perspectives from different cultures, backgrounds, or identities. Within the wider community, *Converse Across Boundaries* advances student internships as a vehicle for crossing social and personal boundaries. And the QEP expands our study-travel programs as a powerful way to encounter other ways of life and to appreciate the cultural variation within our society.

The QEP topic and goals were developed as part of a year-long process involving students, staff, and faculty and including regular consultation with trustees. Analysis of the educational and social environment of Converse revealed that while significant diversity already exists in some respects within the college community, particular constituencies and identities are too often balkanized and many students lack exposure to different cultural traditions and life experiences. In this way, *Converse Across Boundaries: Learning Through Diverse Experiences*, integrates specifically diversity-related themes with approaches drawn from experiential learning initiatives. Converse has embraced a culture of broadening personal and social boundaries that will develop graduates better equipped to constructively navigate a pluralistic world.