

Conversation Partners

Volunteer Handbook

INTENSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM
CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY
NEW BRITAIN, CT 06050

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Thank you for your interest in working as a volunteer for the Conversation Partners Program (CPP) at the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at Central Connecticut State University. This Handbook is designed to help answer some of your questions about the program. If any additional questions arise, please do not hesitate to contact us.

The Intensive English Language Program at CCSU

IELP offers full-time and part-time English language and American culture instruction to international students and faculty, foreign professionals, and members of the Connecticut community. Intensive English Language Courses integrate key skills: Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Grammar. We offer courses for students from the beginning to advanced level. Classes include work in one of CCSU's laboratory rooms, as well as field trips to cultural and historic sites.

IELP Students

IELP enrolls students from around the world. The majority of our students come from Asia, but there are also large numbers of students from the Americas and Eastern Europe, and a growing number of students from Western Europe and Africa. All students must be at least 16 years old, and most are in their mid-twenties. Some students reside in campus housing, but the majority live off-campus with relatives or friends.

WHY CONVERSATION PARTNERS?

The primary goal behind the CPP is to provide a supplemental conversation assistance program for our ESL students. Our students work very intensively at learning English, but many are afraid to use their newly acquired language skills outside of the safe environment of the classroom. Conversation partners can give these students an opportunity to talk casually with native speakers on a regular basis.

In addition to acquiring conversation skills, our students are looking to connect with local people and learn more about American life. CPP is an opportunity for our students to increase their understanding of American culture and to share aspects of their own cultures with thoughtful, interested individuals.

WHO CAN BE A CONVERSATION PARTNER?

This program is open to all who are willing to commit one hour per week to help ESL students with their conversational skills in an informal, one-to-one manner. A background in education or ESL is not necessary -- just an open mind and a willingness to try something new and potentially rewarding.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE MEET?

Students and volunteers participating in the CPP should plan on meeting for one hour each week. IELP students are in class from 8:00 a.m. – 1:30pm Monday thru Friday with breaks for lunch and a snack in between. Program field trips usually take place on Fridays. Volunteers and students should work together to arrange a meeting time that is convenient for both parties.

WHERE SHOULD WE MEET?

Meeting on Campus

There are a few locations on campus where conversation partners can enjoy meeting. The Student Center is a very popular meeting place with plenty of seating and refreshments available. In good weather, the picnic tables outside the Student Center can also be a nice place to meet. There is also the new student gathering space available on the ground floor of the Burritt Library, and a small café on the main floor.

CCSU Campus Parking

Parking is most difficult in the morning, when students arrive for day classes, and after 4:30 p.m., when students arrive for evening classes. There is student parking to the left of the Burritt Library, in both the lot and the garage. Volunteers who are unable to walk from the student lot for medical reasons may be able to get a Medical parking tag from security, but this requires a note from a physician. Please contact the IELP office if this option is necessary for you.

WHAT IF MY STUDENT DOES NOT SHOW UP?

In most cases, students do not skip their conversation appointments unless there is a misunderstanding about when and where to meet. Establishing a regular weekly meeting time and place can help to avoid miscommunications. Emergencies can arise, but students are usually good about letting their conversation partners know when they are not able to attend, either by phoning them directly or having the IELP secretary forward the message.

Unfortunately, there may be the occasional student who behaves in an inconsiderate fashion. If a student casually skips a meeting without attempting to inform you ahead of time, please let IELP know as soon as possible. Having a conversation partner is a privilege, and students who are not committed to meeting regularly will be replaced.

WHAT IF I CAN'T MAKE MY APPOINTMENT?

You will be given the name, address and telephone number of your conversation partner. If you are unable to make your appointment, please call the student directly and let him/her know of the change of plans. Because many of our students live with relatives who may not speak English fluently, leaving a message for a student may sometimes be difficult. The IELP secretary may deliver messages on your behalf.

WHAT SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT?

Students who choose to participate in CPP are hungry for real conversations. You can bring an English/English dictionary to help when you are struggling with certain words, but you may find that you use it less and less as time goes by. Just about any topic that is of interest to both parties could be appropriate, but here are some suggestions for getting started:

1. **The student's native culture:** Students are usually eager to share information about their native countries with Americans who are sincerely interested in learning something new. Consequently, discussing the student's native country can be an excellent place to begin. Ask the student to bring maps, photos, travel brochures, printed web site information, etc. The student can "teach" you about his/her native country, hometown, language, and customs.
2. **Family life:** Because pictures always help to ease communication, both you and the student can bring family photos, draw a family tree, and discuss the importance of family relationships.
3. **Food:** Often, students feel most homesick when they think about the food that they left behind. Discussing food, eating habits, meal times, portion sizes, and even exchanging recipes can be excellent way to make a connection. If the partnership blossoms, you may even wish to share a meal together.
4. **Stereotypes:** Most international students are exposed to American television in their native countries, and there is no question that TV impacts the way that the rest of the world views American culture. You could discuss what expectations/stereotypes the student had about Americans before arriving, and discuss how their perception may or may not have changed as a result of living here.

5. **Performing and Visual Arts:** Not all students are interested in the arts, but they can be a rich source of conversation. Because it is an abstract concept, you may want to discuss the definition of the word art with the student. You can bring the entertainment section from the local newspaper to give you ideas for your discussion. You might even plan a mock evening of entertainment together using the newspaper as a resource. Perhaps meet one week at the New Britain Museum of American Art or a Walnut Hill band shell concert.
6. **Sports:** Bring the sports page and discuss which teams/players you enjoy. Talk about what sports are popular in the student's native country, etc.
7. **OTHER TOPICS:**
 - Pets
 - Holidays
 - Jobs/Professions
 - Kissing/greeting habits and customs
 - Local history, economy, tourist sites, current events
 - Lottery
 - Movies
 - Newspapers
 - Older adults
 - Pace of life---fast food, quick-service, drive-thru, etc.
 - Police
 - Restaurants
 - Supermarkets
 - United Nations
 - Universities
 - Volunteers
 - War/Peace

These are just a few possible topics to help you get started. Once your partner is comfortable with you, he or she will probably ask you all sorts of questions.

DIFFICULT TOPICS:

Your partner may want to discuss potentially controversial topics such as race, sex, class, etc. Most of our students come from countries that are far less diverse than the United States, and they are looking for answers that can be difficult to find.

1. If a student asks you a personal question that you do not wish to answer, tell him/her that you are not comfortable discussing that topic. In fact, if a student asks overly personal questions about your age, weight, income, etc., gently tell the student that such questions are considered inappropriate in American culture. Most students do not wish to offend and would be grateful for your candor. In fact, you could even turn the tables by asking the student what behaviors he/she has observed in America that would be considered inappropriate in his/her native country.

2. Students may ask you difficult questions about race, religion, and moral issues. Again, do not feel the need to discuss anything that upsets or disturbs you. On the other hand, it is perfectly appropriate to share your opinion with the student. You may not be an expert, but you are a thoughtful, concerned citizen. The student will value your point of view, and most students will go out of their way to avoid offending you.
3. Have fun! Chances are that your partner will recognize in you much of what is best about the people of this country--friendliness, open-mindedness, generosity, and volunteerism. Do not be afraid of making a "mistake" by saying the wrong thing. Your partner will be extremely grateful for your help, no matter what you say or do!

WHEN DOES IT END?

Ideally, all conversation partners will continue to meet through the end of the semester. If volunteers are still interested, partnerships can continue into the next semester, or the volunteer can begin working with a new student.