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'Up There With The Heavy Hitters': NMC Study Abroad Program Scores Top 10 National Ranking

By Craig Manning | Dec. 16, 2023

Local culinary arts students honing their skills in the kitchens of the world-famous Culinary Arts Academy Switzerland. Audio technology majors putting their sound engineering skills to a unique test in the caves and castles of Ireland. Nursing students headed for Costa Rica to provide on-the-ground medical assistance.

These are a few of the trips Jim Bensley, director of international services and service learning at Northwestern Michigan College (NMC), has approved for the college's study abroad program in 2024. That program recently notched a top 10 national ranking and landed a grant that will fund the cost of 25 student passports in the next year. Per Bensley, it's all part of an effort for NMC to punch above its weight when it comes to offering international experiences to students.

Each year, the Institute of International Education (IIE) ranks higher learning institutions based on how many students participate in study abroad programs. While NMC has often performed well – the school ranked 12th among community colleges in 2016 – it has never landed a top 10 ranking until now.

On the IIE 2021-22 report (<https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/community-college-leading-institutions/>), NMC lands at number 10 for short-term study abroad at U.S. “associate’s colleges.” IIE rankings are based on how many students participated in study abroad programs during the school year in question. During 2021-22, 50 NMC students traveled abroad for experiences in Colombia, France, Spain and the United Kingdom.

“We’re especially proud of the fact that, for a school of 3,200 students, we’re up there with the heavy hitters,” Bensley says of the ranking, noting that every school that outranks NMC has more students. “We’re in the company of schools such as City College of San Francisco, Mesa Community College, St. Petersburg College, and Brookdale Community College, all of which have at least twice our enrollment. State Center Community College, a community college in California that came in at number 4 with 75 students participating in study abroad, they have an enrollment of 34,000 students. St. Petersburg College has 22,000 students. These schools just have a bigger pool of people to draw from.”

On a per-capita basis, Bensley says NMC would actually be the top community college in the country for study abroad, with 1.6 percent of students participating in some form of international study during 2021-22.

NMC’s study abroad programs could grow even further in 2024. Bensley says students are becoming more comfortable with the idea of traveling abroad again now that the pandemic era drifts into the rearview. In 2020, the college had 70 students lined up for overseas programs, only for those trips to get cancelled. Study abroad came back online in 2022, but has taken some time to recover fully.

NMC also landed a \$4,000 grant from the IIE earlier this year, which will help up to 25 students obtain passports. According to NMC Communications Director Cari Noga, the expense of passports – typically \$160 – can sometimes be a barrier for students who might otherwise consider study abroad.

Finally, Bensley is of the mind that NMC has one of its best-ever slates of study abroad trips lined up for 2024, which he hopes will bring even more students into the fold.

“We're sending biology students down to Florianópolis, Brazil, where they'll be working in environmental science and animal biology,” Bensley tells *The Ticker*. “We have our nursing students going to Costa Rica, where they're going to be performing nursing functions and assessing patients under the guidance of a doctor there. We have our culinary students going to Switzerland for a baking and pastry focused study abroad. And then we have our comparative religions students heading to India for about two weeks. If you're going to study religions, India is one of the best places in the world to do that, because of the variety that exists there.”

Perhaps most unique of all is a trek NMC's audio tech students will be taking to Ireland. “They're going to be doing some sound engineering in caves and in medieval castles,” Bensley says. “They'll be working with Irish musicians at an institute in Derry, Ireland, and their final project is to put together a concert with those musicians where they'll do all the sound and management of the show. That's going to be a real once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them.”

NMC has 65 students signed up across those five trips, which will all take place in May 2024.

Pictured: NMC students on recent study abroad trips to Brazil (top left), Indonesia (bottom left), and France (right)

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