



HOW ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADVANCES A STUDENT-READY GLOBAL EXPERIENCE WITH TERRA DOTTA



Summary

NAME:

Elgin Community
College (ECC)

LOCATION:

Elgin, IL

OF STUDENTS:

- 19,000+ total students
- 180+ international students
- 25+ countries across the student body

Elgin Community College (ECC) has spent decades proving that global learning doesn't require a large budget or a sprawling international office to make a real difference for students. Founded in 1949 as part of Illinois Community College District 509, ECC serves roughly 19,000 students annually and 10,000 students every semester, offering more than 130 career and technical programs alongside 25-plus university transfer majors. Its Center for Global Engagement runs as a centralized hub: one office manages everything from incoming international students to outgoing study abroad, faculty exchange programs, and even an in-house international homestay program.

Four staff members and two student workers support the full breadth of ECC's global engagement work, with Associate Dean Lauren Nehlsen splitting much of her time between the international office and other departments across campus. "Our goal and purpose is to serve our students and community with excellence," says Nehlsen, who also serves as the college's Principal Designated School Official (PDSO) and Senior International Officer (SIO). "Streamlined operations and transparent policies in Global Engagement help us accomplish this."

Unified

digital experience across the entire education abroad pipeline

Automated

contextual communications that replace manual email follow-ups

Streamlined

deployment of new faculty-led programs using standardized templates



For years, the Center for Global Engagement successfully managed its programs, but the staff recognized that its digital infrastructure needed to evolve to match its growing ambitions.

Opportunities

200+

student scholarships

300+

degree and certificate programs

50+

subjects with free tutoring available

30+

transfer partnerships across 100+ academic majors

30+

student clubs

When ambition outpaces older workflows

For years, the Center for Global Engagement successfully managed its programs, but the staff recognized that its digital infrastructure needed to evolve to match its growing ambitions. The office was utilizing an older interface for its study abroad operations, which functioned adequately but required a highly manual, iterative approach to program building.

"We had been to regional and annual international education conferences, and one of the things that had continually been a discussion was that we needed to look at how we were designing and implementing institutional and partner programs within the study abroad platform," explains Nehlsen.

The need for a more efficient system became pressing as the college outlined its goals for the 2026–2027 academic year. The team planned to launch three new faculty-led study abroad programs: a short-term global health and culture program in Belize, an expanded humanities program in Italy, and a culinary arts program in Belize.

Developing these experiences requires immense coordination outside of any software system, including site visits, curriculum alignment, and pricing. The team realized that once the academic groundwork was laid, they needed a backend system that could deploy these programs quickly and consistently.

A strategic partnership for modernization

The decision to revamp their Terra Dotta Study Abroad instance was driven by a desire to unlock the platform's full potential. The team joined a dedicated enablement and training initiative alongside the Terra Dotta Dottan Desk team. The goal was twofold: to create a highly documented, efficient process for backend program creation and to completely redesign the public-facing site interface.

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The transition was a significant undertaking for a small office. “At the very beginning, we were overwhelmed,” Nehlsen notes. “We didn’t know what we didn’t know. It was a lesson in patience because not everything we wanted to do would be done in the first six months. But once we had a realistic understanding of what the system could do, we were able to have some really good, honest conversations with our enablement specialist about our ultimate expectations and outcomes.”

What stood out most during this modernization process was the strategic guidance provided by the Dottan Desk team. Instead of simply explaining the basic, the Terra Dotta team drew upon deep industry knowledge to advise the college on best practices. When the Elgin Community College team inquired about how other institutions handled specific workflows, the Terra Dotta team provided tailored advice, noting that what works for one client might not be the most efficient path for another, and offering customized alternatives.

Mastering the art and science of deployment rules

The most transformative operational shift came when the team fully embraced the platform’s Admin Console and deployment rules. Previously, building and maintaining programs felt disjointed. By adopting deployment rules, the office fundamentally changed its approach to program architecture.

“Utilizing deployment rules is a shift in thinking, but it also is a lesson in both the art and the science of study abroad,” says Nehlsen. “I appreciate that there is more consistency across our program development. It has also created a better user experience for those end users—our students, faculty, and administrators.”



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Now, when the team is ready to launch one of their new faculty-led programs, the ECC team doesn't have to start from scratch. They have established templates for brochures and standardized application components that can be applied universally. This unified shell reduces the hours required to build a new program and ensures that every student experiences a consistent, polished application process.

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Building a student-ready digital front door

While backend efficiency was critical for the staff, the frontend experience was paramount for the students. The college serves a diverse population, and ensuring that global learning feels accessible to everyone is a core part of its mission. Previously, the public-facing study abroad website lacked the interactive elements necessary to drive independent student discovery. If students wanted to know about program costs, financial aid, or available destinations, they often had to email or visit the office in person.

Through dedicated work with Terra Dotta's Site Builder, the team completely reimagined their digital front door. "Our site was challenging to navigate before and, now, it's become the showpiece of our department," says Nehlsen. "We completely redid our entire interface and it's now student-friendly. The information is accessible, and you can filter by programs in a way that we didn't have before."

This deliberate effort to make information publicly available has changed the dynamic of student inquiries. The visually appealing and easily navigable site creates vital awareness that international programs are accessible to all students and community members, ultimately driving higher engagement.

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Automating with empathy

One of the most innovative ways Elgin Community College has leveraged its updated system is by reimagining how they communicate with applicants. Previously, the system used basic query watches to send automated reminders to students with missing application components. These emails were functional but highly transactional, simply alerting students to an approaching deadline.

The team recognized an opportunity to use Terra Dotta's analytics and application triggers to foster a more supportive environment. They set out to build automations that communicated with students in an empathetic, understanding tone.

A prime example is the financial aid certification form. When a student indicates on their application that they intend to use financial aid, they must submit an institutional questionnaire. In the past, the automated reminder provided no context, leaving students confused about the requirement. The team redesigned this trigger to be deeply informative and warm. Now, when the automation runs, it explains the exact "why, what, and who" behind the form. It reassures the student, explains why the document is critical for securing their funding, and clearly directs them to the correct department.

"It creates a clearer expectation for students during the study abroad process," Nehlsen explains. "It also provides us as advisors with transparent and open communication to students without having to draft 20 to 25 separate emails. We know that communication is going to run, and we know it is going to communicate the information we want at the exact point we want during the process."



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A dual footprint for comprehensive support

While much of the recent modernization has focused on outbound education, Elgin Community College also relies on Terra Dotta to support its incoming international population. Processing hundreds of applications annually and managing a growing cohort of enrolled international students requires precision and strict adherence to federal regulations.

Leveraging Terra Dotta’s ISSS platform, the office ensures that its Designated School Officials (DSOs) have the tools they need to remain in compliance and batch data directly to SEVIS. “Having the centralized system that we retain full control over, and can make changes as needed to reflect the current regulatory environment, has really been a blessing,” says Nehlsen. “The batch interface with SEVIS for ISSS and a lot of the functionality the system provides are very easy for DSOs to use.”

For a community college, having this level of autonomy and control over its international student data provides peace of mind, ensuring it can seamlessly support its students from the point of inquiry all the way through to graduation.

Advice for peer institutions

When reflecting on their digital transformation journey, the team at Elgin Community College emphasizes the immense value of investing time in system learning and strategic planning. Transitioning from older workflows to modern, automated processes requires an initial investment of time and energy, but the operational dividends are profound.

“Putting the work in during the short term definitely will help us save time in the long term,” says Nehlsen. “The functionality and improvements that we made for education abroad program development and operations in general have been a very good case in efficiency, consistency, and just being student-ready.”

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A foundation for future global engagement

As Elgin Community College looks toward the future, the foundation they have built within Terra Dotta positions it perfectly for sustainable growth. With new faculty-led programs on the horizon and an empowered student body navigating a user-friendly digital interface, the Center for Global Engagement is thriving.

By prioritizing empathetic communication, backend consistency, and student accessibility, ECC proves that with the right technology partnership, institutions can protect their personalized advising mission while scaling their global impact.



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