

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE—December 5, 2024

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Empowering Future Educators: Northland College Teaching Program Combines Community Connections and Experiential Learning

Ashland, Wis., December 5, 2024 – Northland College’s teaching program is redefining how future educators are prepared for the classroom, emphasizing hands-on, place-based education that integrates deeply with local communities and the outdoors. Through unique partnerships, such as those with area schools and the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center in Finland, Minnesota, Northland’s program equips its students to become innovative, community-oriented educators.

The program’s hallmark is its commitment to experiential learning. A key feature of this approach is the College’s partnership with Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, where education students participate in immersive, outdoor learning experiences during their junior and senior years. This collaboration models the type of education Northland hopes its students will bring to their future classrooms.

“Wolf Ridge offers our students a transformative experience,” said Associate Professor Kevin Zak. “By engaging in high ropes courses, geology lessons, and outdoor fieldwork, our students learn how to incorporate their natural surroundings into dynamic, engaging lesson plans. These tools empower them to inspire their future students in the same way.”

The Wolf Ridge partnership is interwoven with local school connections. Northland students collaborate with schools like Washburn Middle School, where they serve as mentors and co-chaperones for student trips to Wolf Ridge. The connection comes full circle when Northland alumni, now teachers in the region, bring their own students to participate in the same transformative experiences.

For instance, Danielle Nepstad, a Northland alum teaching at Washburn Middle School, was once a Northland student who attended Wolf Ridge. Today, she continues the tradition by organizing trips for her students, demonstrating the enduring impact of the program.

“This program is about more than preparing future educators,” shared Assistant Professor Dani O’Brien. “It’s about fostering a network of support and mentorship. Many of our graduates remain in the region, strengthening local schools and modeling Northland’s core values of environmental sustainability, social justice, and engaged learning.”

Education students at Northland participate in a cohort model, ensuring a strong support system among peers and faculty. During their time in the program, they complete placements in local classrooms as reading buddies, teaching assistants, and STEM educators, while also experiencing international teaching opportunities in places like New Zealand and Scotland.

The teaching program culminates in students designing place-based and inquiry-driven curriculum units during their senior year. These lessons draw inspiration from the experiential learning principles practiced at Wolf Ridge, empowering graduates to bring innovative teaching strategies to their classrooms.

Northland College's teaching program doesn't just prepare educators—it builds community leaders who enrich the schools where they teach. By combining experiential learning with community partnerships and the outdoors, the program ensures graduates are well-equipped to inspire their students and create lasting, positive impacts in their local communities.

Northland College is a private environmental liberal arts college located just blocks away from Lake Superior in Ashland, Wisconsin. Founded in 1892, the College adopted a bold new mission and made history in 1974 as the first college in the country to fully integrate an environmental focus with its liberal arts curriculum. Today, Northland College is a powerful and intimate learning community of about three hundred students from across the United States and beyond.

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