Within traveling distance of Rome and Milan, the historic city of Bologna—known in the Renaissance as “Bologna the Turreted” for its many towers, “Bologna the Fat” for its wealth, and “Bologna the Learned” for its university—is the site of one of IU’s oldest European study-abroad programs. The Bologna Cooperative Studies Program (BCSP) offers undergraduates an opportunity to earn U.S. college credit while studying a full academic year at Bologna’s 900-year-old university.

BCSP is the collective effort of seven U.S. universities—Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, North Carolina, Northwestern, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—joined together in a consortium which sets the program’s academic standards and appoints a rotating faculty residential director. IU’s Office of Overseas Study administers the program on behalf of the consortium. Each year, about 30 students from any field of study are selected to participate, as long as they have attained a ‘B’ average or better, reached at least junior standing at the time the program begins, and completed five semesters of college Italian. Students at non-BCSP institutions may also participate.

Academic year 1993-94 was IU’s turn to appoint a resident director, a position held by Julia Bondanella, IU’s Associate Director of the Honors Division in Bloomington and a scholar of the Italian Renaissance. She found her year in Bologna to be enriching and rewarding because the students were such an “interesting, wonderful, enthusiastic” group. The group of 26 students, almost all from the seven member institutions, came from varied backgrounds—about half in humanities and half in the social sciences—with one-third male, two-thirds female. Three were IU Bloomington juniors: Hugh Aprile (Political Science/Italian), Troy Byler (Germanic Studies/Italian), and Aimée Ducey (Art History/Italian).

What impressed Bondanella most was how absolutely focused many students were about what they wanted to gain from their year abroad and how to go about attaining it. One student’s desire for a home environment landed her a five-month job as a part-time nanny; another helped out in an Italian refugee camp for Bosnian Muslims; still another earned an internship at a U.S. consular office reading and summarizing Italian business reports. During the academic year, they attended regular courses at the University of Bologna, all taught in Italian by regular faculty, ranging from Italian language and literature courses to business, criminology, economics, geography, international relations, political science, sociology, British, American, and German literature, and even Persian art history. One student regularly attended an intensive literature course taught by the renowned Italian writer Umberto Eco.

Bondanella praised her students’ ability to deal with a university environment in which professors are much less approachable, computer facilities a luxury, and bureaucratic structures somewhat idiosyncratic: registration is an informal affair, course grades are based on final 20-minute oral examinations, and student’s vacation plans may depend on when individual professors choose to start or end their semester’s lectures. But cope they did, immersing themselves in the cultural life of an elegant, thriving city where little English is spoken, participating in BCSP-led excursions to such Renaissance centers as Mantua, Urbino, and Tuscany, and traveling on their own to other major European cities. For Hugh Aprile, the year was an unforgettable cultural experience in which he formed many new friendships, both American and Italian.

Director Bondanella pointed out the high motivation of undergraduate students who study Italian and go abroad, since Italian is not normally offered at the high school level. Speaking more broadly, she notes that “as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, our students need more such programs, not only in other areas of Europe, but also in non-Western languages and cultures.” When not busy looking after her students’ many needs, working on the office’s newly computerized database, or writing handbooks and reports, Bondanella found time to work on her own translation projects—one on the life of Titian and the other on Machiavelli’s Discourses. As library collections at the university and elsewhere hold works seldom seen outside Italy, the year abroad also proved invaluable for her own research on the Italian Renaissance.