

By Kyna Rubin

# Commitment and Creativity Reap Significant Rewards

**WHEN ZHANG CHUNSHENG WAS TAPPED** to become vice provost for international affairs at the University of North Alabama in 2009, he saw a unique opportunity to make a difference. With only 43 students heading overseas—most for short-term programs in Europe and Costa Rica—the university had just launched a three-year strategic plan whose aim, in part, was to significantly increase the school's world ties, including its education abroad numbers.

“We want globalization, more curriculum integration, more global learning opportunities for students and faculty, more diverse international student populations,” Zhang recalls UNA president William G. Cale, Jr., telling him. Equipped with strong commitment from leaders of the 7,200-student campus (Alabama's oldest public university, founded in 1830) and a 10-year full professorship to boot, Zhang assumed the challenge of stirring up the interest and funds to expand the institution's global links.

abroad participation propelled UNA's percentage of students studying abroad from 0.60 percent to 1.68 percent (2012–2013)—a portion higher than the national average, which was 1.4 percent in the 2011–2012 year.

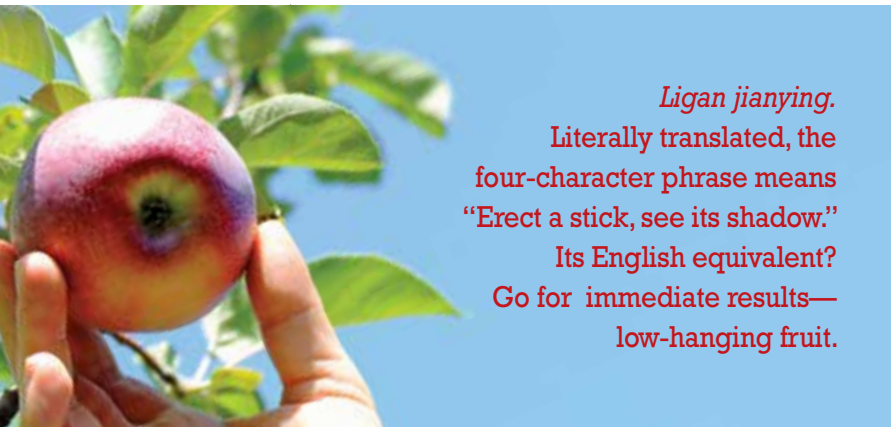
### Broad Efforts with a Spotlight on China

Fifty-six-year-old Zhang, who was raised in China and has a PhD in higher education administration from Bowling Green State University, has cast a wide net to feed UNA's internationalization. Since his arrival, Zhang has helped create bilateral partnerships as vehicles for both new study abroad opportunities and dual-degree programs. With the active involvement of UNA academic deans and faculty, Zhang has put into place double-degree partnerships with 39 institutions on four continents.

The main driver of UNA's education abroad and dual-degree initiatives is China. UNA's China education abroad program, which Zhang launched in 2011, has engaged from one-quarter to more than one-third of the school's study abroad population, depending on the year.

And of UNA's 39 foreign partner schools, 22 are in China. (Of the university's 400 international students on campus, 40 percent participate in UNA-Chinese partner dual-degree programs.)

It's no coincidence that UNA's leading Chinese partner is Tianjin Foreign Studies University. That school is located in Zhang's hometown of Tianjin, a city 70 miles southeast of Beijing. Zhang had been working with that institution for years while involved with education abroad in earlier posts at the University of Oregon, St. Cloud State University, the University of Missouri-Columbia, and Bowling Green State University.



*Ligan jianying.*  
Literally translated, the four-character phrase means “Erect a stick, see its shadow.”  
Its English equivalent?  
Go for immediate results—  
low-hanging fruit.

The results have been dramatic for the Florence, Alabama, campus, where more than 70 percent of students rely on financial aid and summer jobs to pay for tuition, and education abroad is traditionally viewed as a luxury few can afford.

Between the 2009–2010 and 2012–2013 academic years, the annual number of UNA students studying abroad shot up from 43 to 121. In only four years, cumulative figures for those taking off for China went from zero to 106.

In absolute terms, those education abroad numbers may seem modest. But the expansion in total education



University of North Alabama professors Dennis Balch (left, who teaches management and marketing) and Michael Pretes (right, who teaches geography) were the faculty trip leaders for the university's first study abroad program to China. This photo was taken in summer 2011 during a school visit by UNA study abroad program participants in Tianjin, China.

## The Expansion Strategy: *Ligan Jianying*

How did Zhang manage such a stunning boost to UNA's international links in just four years? He is quick to say he couldn't have done it on his own.

"Especially for a vice provost for international position, if you don't have the solid, unwavering support from the provost and the president, you may have the knowledge, you may have the skills, but you won't be able to accomplish what you want to accomplish."

According to Zhang, when he arrived on campus, the president guaranteed he would have all the support he needed "to move the university to the next level of excellence when it comes to international education."

To beef up UNA's education abroad opportunities, Zhang says he followed a dictum espoused (to perhaps less savory ends) by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, which he had witnessed as an adolescent: *Ligan jianying*. Literally translated, the four-character phrase means "Erect a stick, see its

shadow." Its English equivalent? Go for immediate results—low-hanging fruit.

"If we could get the first group of students to China, I knew they would love it," says Zhang.

## Leveraging Funds

However, with almost three-quarters of UNA student families unable to afford college on their own, Zhang knew that ratcheting up education abroad would require a broad infusion of scholarship funds. To get things going, he reached beyond the university.

In 2010 Zhang secured a \$20,000 seed grant from the Washington, D.C.-based U.S.-China Education Trust to create UNA's first China program. In the proposal, Zhang framed UNA's education abroad effort in the context of President Obama's 2009 initiative to send 100,000 U.S. students to China by 2014. The grant was used to leverage an additional \$63,800, an amount raised by a wide variety of sources that illustrated the depth and breadth of UNA's support for bolstering education abroad.

Of that nearly \$64,000, \$20,000 came from the university president's office, \$17,500 from local businesses, \$16,000 from UNA's business college (which was increasingly interested in sending its students to China), and \$15,000—not all used in year one—from state legislators (who used their discretionary office fund) whom UNA's president personally lobbied.

As an example of the campus education abroad push, according to Zhang, over the past three years the UNA business college has carried out fundraising campaigns that have generated \$16,000 annually toward UNA's China education abroad program. For its first fundraiser, the business college dean mobilized the marketing faculty to design brochures for "a typical southern barbecue," says Zhang, for which students and faculty sold \$25 individual tickets and tables for \$500. "The president, provost, everyone bought a ticket," says Zhang.

The business college now sends 15 to 20 students to China a year.

The initial seed grant and the funds it leveraged covered expenses for 26 UNA students and two faculty to spend four weeks at Tianjin Foreign Studies University in summer 2011—the first experience in China for all involved. Among the students, 12 had never been abroad, five never on an airplane. A second (and final) \$20,000 grant from the same organization in 2012—again matched by the president's office—secured a month in China for 44 UNA students.

### Calibrating the Right Institutional Matches

Armed with individual scholarships of \$1,500 to \$3,500, the first batch of UNA students to China studied business or geography in Tianjin. Classes were taught by UNA faculty and punctuated with lectures by host university professors and fieldtrips around China. In 2012, UNA expanded its China offerings to include Beijing Sports

University and Nanjing Arts University. Another 34 UNA students headed to China in May 2013 in a group that newly included communications and theater majors.

In 2014 Zhang will add a new, Alabama-relevant discipline to the mix. UNA students will be able to study the entertainment industry at the Nanjing Arts University, which, says Zhang, has one of China's first such programs in the country.

"The blues are very vibrant" in Florence, Alabama, says Zhang. Florence is the birthplace of famous blues composer and musician W.C. Handy, and UNA has one of the best BA entertainment industry programs in the country, he notes. Matching Chinese institutional strengths with the specific academic interests of UNA students is one of Zhang's priorities in creating increased education abroad options.

Parallel to that notion, on the other end of the flow—Chinese-to-UNA—Zhang came

up with the idea of capitalizing on UNA's "very good" commercial Spanish program by hosting Spanish majors from Tianjin Foreign Studies University to study Spanish and English for two-year stints. During their summers here they'll attend UNA's education abroad programs in Peru and Costa Rica.

Why focus on Tianjin's Spanish majors? Zhang says the port city of Tianjin is home to many Spanish companies and growing numbers of Spanish speakers, making UNA's commercial Spanish program an attractive draw. And why would Chinese Spanish majors pick the United States over Mexico or Spain? The United States is the preferred study destination for these Spanish majors, who typically minor in English, according to Zhang.

### Winning Hearts and Changing Minds

Studying abroad may seem a given for students attending well-off liberal arts colleges around the country. For schools whose student population struggles to afford at-home tuition, let alone extras such as study abroad, having an overseas experience is not de rigueur.

Add to the mix traditional U.S. views of a country like China, which remains communist in name, and the challenge of engaging students in a firsthand experience abroad is that much greater—as can be the pay off.

UNA students back from China write about how their experiences have widened their world outlook. But their individual transformations have created larger waves that have swelled beyond the university campus.

According to Zhang, when UNA students got home, word got around fast, and they assumed celebrity status. "So and so's granddaughter in church went to China, maybe we should have her talk to us" about her experience, Zhang learned people were saying. As the result of an organic process—nothing Zhang's office did, he says—returned students and faculty were invited to present their impressions of China to local Kiwanis clubs, Rotary clubs, churches, and a wide university audience.

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Returnees make arguments for learning Chinese and seeing China's development up close. Two of UNA's student body presidents, one last year, one this year, have studied in China, says Zhang, which helps publicize the China program across campus.

"The impact is far reaching," he says. Not only has firsthand exposure to China opened students' eyes, it also indirectly has helped change the views that local community members have about China, observes Zhang.

### A Work in Progress

UNA is in the process of raising funds to sustain its education abroad opportunities. Between 2009 and 2012 the university president increased from \$28,000 to \$60,000 the school's annual international program offering committee budget, used for study abroad scholarships. In 2013, the \$60,000 study abroad scholarship fund was made permanent. UNA has hired two fundrais-

ing professionals whose portfolio includes raising private funds for the international affairs office. The school is planning further fundraising events to meet the goal of providing an \$800 education abroad scholarship to each of the estimated 120 students who study abroad annually. The university plans to raise a \$1 million endowment fund for study abroad scholarships as part of the university's first capital campaign goal of \$25 million. And Zhang's office is searching for other grants that, if won, would allow UNA to increase study abroad in Latin America.

Scholarships aside, UNA is also working to enhance its stateside academic preparation for students planning to study in China. Zhang says that, other than a class taught by a volunteer Chinese language instructor, the university had no courses to offer on China in 2011.

In the 2013–2014 academic year the third year of the China education abroad program, UNA required students to take a

one-credit introductory "crash course" on the country and the language—given, says Zhang, so students will take Chinese culture more seriously. The course meets half-day on Saturdays over four or five weekends. "Part of our plan," says Zhang, "is to have a more serious Chinese curriculum."

Zhang visits China minimally twice or three times a year, sometimes with the provost, sometimes with the president, he says. These trips show everyone involved "that global education is one of the strategic directions we all want to strengthen," he states.

Linking UNA's education abroad campaign to the Obama administration's 100,000 Strong initiative, Zhang dons UNA's own efforts the "UNA 100 Strong China Initiative." One difference between the two? UNA's goal, to send 100 students a year by 2014, has already been reached. **IE**

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