U. of I. builds an Illini presence in China

When Larry Zhao returned here to China's largest city in 2005 after getting a master's degree in business from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he wanted to connect with other Illini.

He invited them for tea to discuss business opportunities, and he organized an annual networking event that drew about 10 graduates.

"I organized the events myself. I emailed them to say, 'I'm the new guy coming back. Maybe we can have tea together?''" Zhao said.

He's no longer feeling like the lone ambassador in Shanghai for U. of I. Within the past year, the university's president, chancellor, business school dean and alumni association have visited. What's more, U. of I. opened a Shanghai office in December.

"Ten years ago, there was no dean coming to China — or they came for (personal reasons)," said Zhao, 42, who worked in corporate marketing before starting his own company last year. "Now you can see, it is a very different status."

U. of I. has joined a growing number of U.S. colleges and universities that have opened offices in mainland China. Among others, the University of Chicago in 2010 opened its Center in Beijing, which serves as a base for students and
faculty studying and doing research in China. Indiana University opened a Beijing office this spring.

The U. of I. office, on the same floor as the state of Illinois' China headquarters, serves several purposes. Two employees are working to build a database of Chinese alumni as the university turns its attention toward fundraising overseas. They are also trying to help recent alumni find jobs as most of the university's Chinese undergraduates return home after graduation.

The Shanghai office also will be used to promote academic partnerships with Chinese universities and to share economic development opportunities in Illinois, including at the research park on the U. of I. campus.

U. of I. officials acknowledge they don't know how many alumni live in China, but they know the numbers will skyrocket. The university counts about 2,150 registered alumni living in China but says the actual number could be 10 times higher.

"As we have more and more alumni in all parts of the world, we need to be developing strong relationships and keeping, in some sense, the University of Illinois visible," said U. of I. President Robert Easter, who attended an alumni reception in Shanghai in June. "People go back and never hear from us. ... You have to show up occasionally and invite them to events and build connections that long term lead to philanthropy."

Easter said that U. of I. has been "late coming to the fundraising game," especially as it relates to international alumni. But just as the university's budget now relies on international students' tuition, the institution also is hoping international alumni giving can contribute to the budget. He spent four days in China in June, followed by four days each in Vietnam and Taiwan.

The university in general has turned more to private giving as state support has declined in recent years. But only a small amount has come from abroad — $1.1 million in total commitments to the Urbana-Champaign campus in the past four years. About $500,000 comes from 51 gifts from alumni in China, a large share of that from one donation this year, according to the university.

"Historically, we haven't needed the money," said Scott Koeneman, the Urbana-Champaign campus's director of international advancement. "Now, we need the money."

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