

# Study Abroad Trips Enrich Students

*The University of North Alabama is sending more students abroad than ever.*

by Erin Rowley  
Publication assistant

**C**raig Christy grew up with a global background: His American father married his French mother shortly after World War II, and his youth in Knoxville was filled with trips to France, Germany and other parts of the world.

As director of global engagement at the University of North Alabama, Christy helps students have some of the same cultural experiences he's had.

When he first came to the university in 1988, he said, study abroad opportunities were limited, with not much other than trips to France twice a year.

He credits the university's former president, Robert Potts, and his assistant, Dan Howard, for bringing in cultural diversity by expanding programs that brought foreign students to the school.

These efforts include the Magellan Exchange, which allows students from international institutions to study tuition-free at the University of North Alabama, and in turn its students can study tuition-free at those institutions.

Nowadays, the university's students go all over the world.

"The number of students participating in some form of study abroad continues to increase each year," Christy said. In 2012, about 1.56 percent of the 7,200 students studied abroad, and this year that has risen to about 1.6 percent.

This spring and summer alone, 35 students traveled to China, 26 to Ireland, 13 to London, 12 to France, 11 to Costa Rica, 10 to Peru and two to Taiwan.

Will Riley was part of a group of students who traveled to China to study at Tianjin Foreign Studies University from May 12 to June 2.

He graduated in May from the University of North Alabama but finished up his coursework while in China. He enjoyed popular tourist attractions such as the Great Wall of China, and less famous ones, such as climbing Mount Tai.

"We climbed for more than an hour and 6,500 steps later, we were on cloud nine — literally," he said.

Kayla Kelley also went on the China trip. She enjoyed the excursions and the opportunity to learn new skills while inter-



Kayla Kelley poses for a photo with the grandfather of her Chinese-host sister, who taught her Chinese calligraphy — which "may look easy, but it was definitely not," she said. Kelley also learned to play a local musical instrument and make Chinese dumplings, and she had the opportunity to visit the local art museum.

Photo courtesy of Kayla Kelley

acting with her Chinese host family.

Kelley stayed with a girl named Sha Sha Wen — Nancy was her English name — and her family. Wen's grandfather taught Kelley calligraphy.

"It may look easy, but it definitely was not," Kelley said. "He guided me through each and every stroke and I finally ended up with a beautiful number poem. I also had the opportunity to make traditional Chinese dumplings, visit the local art museum, and learn to play a musical instrument called a Como Chinese bamboo clapper."

The university's Spanish professor, Claudia Polo Vance, who went along on the China trip, said she loves seeing students such as Kelley gain new skills and viewpoints after they've gone abroad.

"I love the coming home trip because they are so changed," Vance said. "They are different people and they understand differently."

Vance also has taken students on monthlong trips to Costa Rica for the last four summers. This year, the trip took place in

the end of June.

A 17-year veteran of the university and an alumna, she studied abroad herself through the university as part of a summer program in Nice, France.

Her first trip with students was in 2008, as part of a program in Mexico.

Though that was just 5 years ago, she has seen study abroad opportunities expand from just a few to numerous countries, including Tanzania, Honduras and, of course, Costa Rica.

"We have wonderful administration that has put a great emphasis on globalizing our campus," she said. "The faculty in the last five or so years has been looking for opportunities to get their students abroad, whether it's theater, communications, business or foreign languages, which is the traditional department."

Senior Dillon Green, from Florence, intended to study chemistry when he first started at the university, but he quickly realized that wasn't for him. He instead found that he loved languages — French and Spanish, in particular. Green went on this year's and last year's Costa Rica trips.

He had taken one year of Spanish prior to the 2012 trip, which marked the first time he ever had been outside of the country, and he was worried he wouldn't be able to keep up. But from the intensive classes to the experience of living with

a host family, "my Spanish in just two weeks went through the roof," he said.

His experience with his host family was extremely positive. It provided an invaluable sense of comfort when a personal tragedy struck back home while he was abroad. Green left the 2012 trip just two weeks after his mother passed away. He still talks to his "Mama Pica" — a term of endearment students use for their host moms — over the phone and credits her and her family for his positive experience.

"As far as my experience goes, my family was what made it so great," he said.

Senior Laura Lopez also went on last year's Costa Rica trip. Lopez's parents came from Guatemala, but living in Russellville, Ala., she grew up speaking English and didn't start learning Spanish until 12. A family trip to Guatemala inspired her to pursue Spanish as a major and to embrace the university's study abroad programs. As with Green's experience, her host family treated her like family.

"Even to this day, they kind of check up on me," she said.

Traveling abroad improved her language skills, opened her eyes to different cultures and forced her to try new things that she might not have been adventurous enough to have tried previously.

Lopez's experience is not unique. Most travelers experience some form of culture shock when in a place they've never been to previously.

Riley experienced that in China. One of the things that shocked him most was the lack of interest Chinese locals showed in democracy or religion.

"Studying abroad makes students aware of the larger world beyond their local comfort zone," Christy said. "The experience of studying abroad helps students discover themselves as well as others and contributes to their intellectual growth and maturity."

Getting out of that comfort zone is an important part of that study abroad experience, and though some students may be intimidated by the idea of being uncomfortable in foreign surroundings, the university does everything it can to prepare them before they leave.

"Through courses such as Cross-Cultural Interaction as well as mandatory pre-departure orientation for all students headed abroad, students learn how to relate to other cultures and how to adapt," Christy said. "This year a new course, Introduction to China, gave all students participating in study abroad in China a thorough introduction to the art, language, history, culture and business practices of China, as well as practical information related to lodging, food, travel and so on."

In addition, university students are encouraged to take part in international-themed events and they also can be paired with an international student as a conversation partner.

Vance prepares her students as best she can. However, a certain level of discomfort is an important part of the experience, she said.

"If it is like home, I'm not doing my job. I love that every trip I take, there are people I take who have never been on a plane, or have never been outside the South. I love giving them the experience that they can put themselves in others people's shoes," she said.

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Top left: A few Chinese students from the Tianjin Foreign Studies University. They will come to the University of North Alabama in 2014 to study Spanish.

Top right: Will Riley in his University of North Alabama apparel at the Great Wall of China. Riley was part of a group of students who traveled to China to study at Tianjin Foreign Studies University from May 12 to June 2.

Middle left: Professor Claudia Polo Vance with two students while in China.

Middle center: Claudia Polo Vance visiting the Tiananmen Square on an excursion in Beijing.

Bottom row: At left, University of North Alabama students at Manuel Antonio on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica in 2011. At right, students Dillon Green and Laura Lopez at the National Museum in Costa Rica in 2012.

Photos courtesy of Claudia Polo Vance, Will Riley and Dillon Green.

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Vance isn't immune to being uncomfortable abroad just because she's traveled a lot, a fact that was abundantly clear to her on the China trip.

"It was wonderful," she said. "I love culture shock."

Some students are more intimidated by the sticker shock of studying abroad than by the culture shock, though.

"I think that the money is a big issue for a lot of people," Vance said. "They just dismiss it out of hand."

Students should check out the ever-increasing amount of scholarship opportunities that are available before they decide studying abroad is too expensive, Vance said.

Studying abroad isn't just good for the individual students who participate in it, Christy said. It also has a positive impact on the local community when students return and use their new-found experiences as a global citizen to enhance the quality of life in their hometowns.

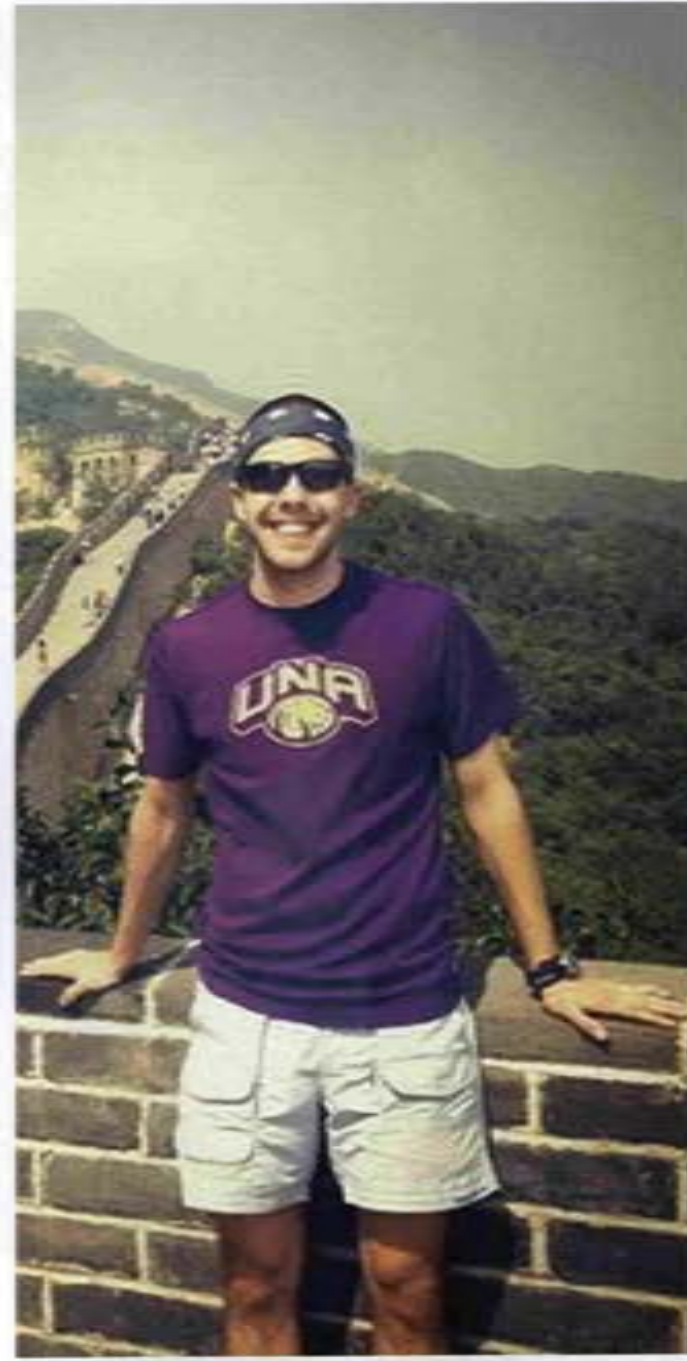
"Those who have studied abroad have a better understanding of the world and their place in it. They have learned to negotiate differences and meet new challenges. They have learned to be flexible and how to collaborate with individuals coming from different backgrounds and core beliefs than their own," Christy said.

"In a global world, those who cannot cross the bridge from local to global simply cannot compete."

"In surveys of what employers are most looking for as they review resumes of recent graduates, study abroad experience and internships are at the top of the list. Employers know that those who have studied abroad have initiative, can get along with people from diverse backgrounds, are flexible and can meet new challenges. These are all transferable skills."

Going abroad has made him realize how important it is to be aware of the entire global community, Riley said.

"Understanding the functionality of other countries is essential for survival," he said. "It just makes me globally aware. You can't truly understand that until you're more than 6,000 miles from your bed."



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