Looking West to Find the East

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Looking west to find the East
Increasingly, Linfield College is looking west — beyond the steps of Pioneer Hall, past the Oak Grove, the Oregon coast and the Pacific Ocean, to East Asia. Asia offers incredible economic opportunity. More of our friends and neighbors are either working in Asia or working for Asian companies in the United States.

In the coming years, students who study the Mandarin language and Chinese history, philosophy and culture, or Japanese, Korean or Vietnamese language and culture, will have a leg up on their peers. We can expect to see more Asian students studying at Linfield, and more Linfield students and faculty traveling there. Through a variety of partnerships and programming, Linfield is bridging the gap between McMinnville and the Asian continent to benefit global learners.

The first time Chris Keaveney set foot in Japan, it was the middle of the night and he did not know a soul.

Hired to teach at a local American school in Kobe, he arrived a month early to acclimate. He spoke no Japanese and he was whisked from the airport to a sparse apartment and left on his own.

“I really didn’t see anyone for several weeks, until school started,” said Keaveney, who was 24 at the time. “I didn’t speak the language. I was lost. There were days I wouldn’t speak to one human being. It was the loneliest time of my life.”

Fortunately for Linfield students, the experience of being an ethnic minority has stayed with Keaveney, associate professor of Japanese and this year’s Edith Green Distinguished Professor. In preparation for study abroad, Keaveney fortifies students with language skills, cultural knowledge and a welcoming support system once they arrive. Soft-spoken and calm, he nods graciously as he talks and listens, a reflection of the Asian culture that has shaped his life.

“China is a land of contrasts and I certainly found that to be true,” said Bruce Wyatt, vice president for college relations, who explored educational opportunities throughout the country over the summer. Clockwise from bottom right, Linfield students in Yokohama, Japan; Wyatt and Qian Wang, an instructor from Peking University who is teaching at Linfield this year; Wyatt, who attended the 10th anniversary celebration of Sias International University, with founder Shawn Chen ’87; a Chinese woman talks on a cell phone while carrying a basket on her back; The Great Wall of China; Jim Diamond, professor of chemistry, worked in the Beijing lab of former student Jingsong Zhu ’93; Jennifer Stewart ’10 attended Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.
In the dozen years he’s been at Linfield, Keaveney has created and nurtured the Asian Studies program into one of the strongest in the Pacific Northwest, with more study-abroad options than most other institutions. Modest and unassuming, he points out that he is building on a foundation established in the 1930s when Elam Anderson, then Linfield president, made initial connections in China. But Keaveney has made his own connections. Linfield now averages more than 35 students majoring and minoring in Japanese and Asian Studies annually. And that number continues to grow.

Keaveney has often been called Linfield’s “Asia guy,” and the title fits, according to John Sagers, associate professor of history, who specializes in Asian history.

“Chris has been the driving force in the Linfield Asian Studies program,” said Sagers. “He brings tremendous energy and enthusiasm to his teaching and scholarly work.”

Linfield’s “Asia guy”

Although he is known as the “Asia guy,” Keaveney had no international experience as an undergraduate college student. With a bachelor’s degree in English and a yearning to travel, he spent two years teaching English in American Samoa before moving to Japan and finding his niche. There, Keaveney taught English and attended Japanese language classes with kindergarteners to learn kanji, the written Chinese characters also used in Japanese, folding his long legs under elementary desks that came to his knees.

“I was determined that I would be literate,” he said. Soon, Keaveney tackled Chinese, too. “From the beginning I was interested in the relationship between the two languages and cultures. Chinese was always an opportunity for me to come up for air and do something
Chris Keaveney, pictured with KGU student Yuki Itakura (center) and Katelyn Tamashiro ‘13, founded the Linfield Taiko drummer group in 2002, even constructing the drums himself from donated wine barrels and cowhides. The group is open to students and community members.