Elmira College is a small liberal arts college near the banks of the Chemung River in upstate New York. Founded in 1855 as Elmira Female College it was the first American college founded to grant a baccalaureate degree to women that was of equal rigor to the best men’s colleges, and it continued as a women’s college until it became co-ed in 1969. Mark Twain spent his summers at Quarry Farm in Elmira, the family estate of his wife—and Elmira College alumna—Olivia Louise Langdon, and there he worked on his most famous works. In 1982, the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies was established, and Quarry Farm was given to the College, which remains one of the leading Centers for Mark Twain research in the world.

Carrying on its tradition of expanding educational opportunities for its students, Elmira College was an early adopter of a program that brought young Japanese students—called Japanese teaching scholars—to America to teach Japanese for a year in exchange for taking courses. As Associate Dean Steve Coleman tells the story, “We started having Japanese teaching scholars come to teach probably 25 years ago. Then, after many years, the agency we used went out of the Japanese teaching business. Luckily, I came across an email from Tom Mason, the Director of ALLEX, indicating an interest in supplying Japanese teachers. I followed up on that, one thing led to another, and since then things are better than ever.

“When we were working with the other agency we had the teaching scholar come for a year and then they would leave. They would get college credit and might take some classes, but they wouldn’t get a degree. Tom mentioned to us that we might be able to attract better candidates if we were to offer two years and the possibility of a master’s degree.
“At graduation this year we had something very special happen: Yuki Yanagi became our first Japanese teaching scholar to complete her master’s degree. She received her Master of Science in General Education. And now our current Chinese teaching scholar, Percy Liu, will be entering her second year in the master’s program, and we have a new Japanese teacher coming in the fall. So, all of this has worked out very well. It has worked out very well for the teaching scholars. It has worked out very well for Elmira College—getting some really great folks coming with great skills. And it has worked out well for our students, who are getting great language instruction.”

When ALLEX representatives discuss plans to begin a new language program at a college, we often emphasize the advantage of the 2-year Teaching Associate Program over the 1-year Teaching Fellow Program, because of the stability and consistency of pedagogy when the instructor is teaching for two years. But Dean Coleman highlighted another benefit—the level of skills of the instructor: “The language skills of our masters candidates are way ahead of the previous teaching scholars we have had. Percy is the first Chinese teaching scholar we have had, and she speaks English very well. This makes a big difference in the communication abilities of the teacher, and I think that translates into success in the classroom.

“So we have a situation where we get people here who can teach well, they speak English fluently or almost fluently, and they are prepared to take on masters level work. I have to say that Yuki worked very hard both on her teaching and her academic studies, and she did very well academically, she was a very strong student.

“Percy, our Chinese teaching scholar has also done well this year. And Percy is very popular with students. We have a spring 6-week term and this year about 8 or 10 students who had taken her language classes chose to do an independent study with Percy. That is really good—it shows what a popular teacher she is. Our ALLEX teaching scholars also get excellent— I mean excellent—teaching evaluations, both on the narrative evaluations and the statistical ones. So that means the students like them. And also the faculty member in charge of our language programs, she likes them. So that means both the students and the faculty have given a thumbs up to the teaching scholars from ALLEX.”

When we talk to small schools like Elmira College one of the most common concerns we hear is, “We are just not sure if the student interest in Chinese is there.” The experience of ALLEX is that if you build an Asian language program and you let your students know that these languages are available, they will come. Elmira College is a good example of that principle and we like to point out the exemplary job they do of promoting these languages.

Dean Coleman described an arrangement at summer registration where the incoming students stop at a table, set up just before they sign up for their language assessments, where they get a chance to chat with other students who have already taken Chinese or Japanese. The enthusiasm of the experienced students is a great recruiting tool, and the first-year language classes have had consistent enrollments between 10 to 25 students.
Study abroad is always a good incentive for students to pursue foreign languages, and Elmira has structured an excellent approach called the Japanese Opportunity Program: Any student who takes two years of Japanese, maintains a 3.0 in their Japanese courses and an overall GPA of 2.5, is eligible to spend the fall semester of their junior year in Japan. At registration, Dean Coleman explains, “We ask, ‘Anyone here ever had any interest in studying in Japan?’ Some hands go up and we say, ‘I am telling you about this now because if want to take advantage of this opportunity in your junior year, you need to start taking Japanese in your freshman year.’ We usually get a number of students signing up for Japanese because they are interested in this study abroad program.”

Dean Coleman also makes sure that all of Elmira’s ROTC cadets know about the Army’s new Critical Language Incentive Pay, under which cadets who take Chinese (as well as several other “critical languages”) receive $100 a month on top of their normal ROTC scholarship, and this amount increases with each year of language study up to $250 per month for taking a fourth year of the language.

Beyond their successful teaching and personal studies, at Elmira the ALLEX teachers have also become good ambassadors for the College. “One of the things we require of our teaching scholars,” Dean Coleman explains, “is that they have some visibility in the community and they help to educate the community about Chinese or Japanese culture. Yuki has given presentations to the garden club about gardening in Japan. And recently we had a high school student from Elmira Free Academy who was preparing for a summer trip to Japan. Yuki met with her, gave her tips and advice, and introduced her to the language and culture so that she had some familiarity with these things when she went on her trip. Over the years our teaching scholars have made many visits to local schools and given presentations to classes about Japanese or Chinese culture. They have done a wonderful job of doing this.”

As Dean Coleman summarized his experience after three years of working with ALLEX, “As far as I am concerned, ALLEX is a proven commodity in terms of how you screen folks, how you train people, and how you operate. So I have tremendous confidence in the organization.

“Not long ago I saw Yuki as she was walking out of her graduation ceremony and I said hello and congratulated her. And as we were chatting I heard a couple of people saying, ‘We wish she was staying for another year or two.’ She made such an impression that people will miss her when she leaves.”