A compact office in a modern high-rise in Shanghai's central business district is a little patch of Buckeye turf, half a world away from Ohio State University's flagship campus.

The China Gateway office, open since February, is the first of as many as half a dozen "global gateways" to be established by the university. It is meant to jump-start partnerships between Ohio State and Chinese universities and expand existing ones, encourage international-student recruitment and study-abroad placement, and reconnect overseas alumni to the institution, among other purposes.

American colleges have long had a physical presence overseas, ranging from study-abroad centers to branch campuses. But while those facilities tend to serve a single purpose, Ohio State is among a handful of institutions, both American and foreign, opening so-called liaison offices abroad, distinguished by their multiple missions to support international teaching, research, student exchange, and alumni engagement. Ohio State even plans to offer specialized executive-training programs through its gateway locations.

Such portals abroad could become even more common, as the international activities of colleges, particularly large research institutions like Ohio State, grow in quantity and complexity. Joseph A. Alutto, Ohio State's provost, calls the offices "administrative hubs, with all the different relationships and partnerships radiating off like spokes."

Overseas offices on the ground are important not only in managing the breadth of colleges' international work, but also in deepening ties in countries like China, where face-to-face interactions are especially valued. "There is a difference between Skype, telephone, and e-mail and a person who lives and breathes," says Samuel S. Robfogel, director of international initiatives at Georgetown University.

However, such outposts can be costly to maintain and are only as valuable as the services they provide to administrators and faculty members. Overseeing an office thousands of miles and a dozen time zones away from the home campus can be tricky, and distant managers may struggle to feel like part of their university's broader international strategy.
Britta Baron, vice provost and associate vice president, international, at the University of Alberta, says the jury is still out on the offices. "There's not a lot of evidence yet that they're functional," she says.

Still, Ms. Baron, who ran liaison offices in Germany and the United States for several institutions, says she expects to see more colleges setting them up. "You cannot effectively project yourself into another country without a day-to-day lifeline," she says. "It's hard for me to imagine being a globally active university without having a presence abroad."

**Embedded Intelligence**

William I. Brustein, Ohio State's vice provost for global strategies and international affairs, arrived at the university in the summer of 2009 to plan ways to integrate international activities across the campus and to expand the institution's global reach.

The global-gateway concept was among the first to emerge from that strategic-planning process. Ohio State selected locations to follow existing student-recruitment numbers and faculty and institutional relationships as well as the cultural, economic, and political importance of certain countries. Offices are being planned in India and Brazil, and the university also is considering Turkey, sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe.

China was the logical pilot site, given the extent of the work already going on in the country and the interest in doing more, Mr. Brustein says.

The gateway office, located near a bustling subway stop, is about 270 square feet in size, with space for visiting professors, prospective-student interviews, and alumni gatherings. Adjacent high-tech conference rooms can accommodate larger gatherings, such as executive-education courses or orientations for students arriving in China. If the initial stages go smoothly—Ohio State still must win approval from Chinese authorities to operate as a foreign-owned enterprise so it can, for one thing, charge fees for training programs—Mr. Brustein hopes to move to a space about 10 times as large.

He chose a location that was central and accessible to public transportation. And he opted not to put the office on the campuses of any of Ohio State's 35 to 40 university partners in China, so as to avoid locking his institution into a bilateral relationship.
Other colleges have selected on-campus locales, however. Georgetown University has its China-liaison office at Fudan University, in Shanghai. Fudan is a good fit, Mr. Robfogel says, because it is one of the first Chinese institutions to offer a liberal-arts track and because being on the campus affords Georgetown professors an up-close look at Chinese scholarship. The location has not precluded Georgetown from working with other universities, he says.

While all liaison offices are distinguished by their multiple roles, other universities have embraced various models and have different focuses. The University of Southern California, which has six international offices, mostly in Asia, and one more planned, sees them as university "embassies," its public face abroad. The liaison staff helps match students with study-abroad programs and internships, and assists international recruiters in identifying high schools and colleges that could be sources of promising students.

By contrast, Megan Brenn-White, executive director of the Hessen Universities Consortium, a confederation of 12 institutions that opened a liaison office in New York, estimates that she spends more than a third of her time on back-office support work and on educating German administrators and faculty members about higher education in the United States.

Building up strategic research partnerships is one of the primary missions of the University of Melbourne's San Francisco-based office. "We are a long way away from most of the research engines of the world," says Susan Elliott, deputy vice chancellor for global engagement at the Australian institution.

With the help of its American director, Krista Northup, Melbourne has forged an especially strong relationship with Vanderbilt University. She spots potential research collaborations, based on institutional strengths. "It's the kind of intelligence that comes from being embedded in a community," Ms. Elliott says.

**Drumming Up Interest**

Ms. Brenn-White, who organized a panel discussion on liaison offices at a recent meeting of the Association of International Education Administrators, says she was surprised by the level of interest.

But if such offices are gaining increasing attention among international educators, they have a long way to go to increase their visibility on campus.
Georgetown has had its office in Shanghai for three years, but many faculty members still go to China without ever making contact, Mr. Robfogel says.

Professors have to see the office as something useful, not as just another administrative hurdle to working abroad, he says. So in speaking with faculty members, he emphasizes the unique perspective of the office’s director, a Chinese national who completed graduate studies in the United States. "She’s really someone who can bridge the two cultures," he says.

At Ohio State, Mr. Brustein has worked to generate early enthusiasm among faculty members. He has enlisted academics with significant experience in the first three gateway countries, China, India, and Brazil, to serve on advisory committees. Indian faculty members, for example, helped make the case that the Indian gateway office should be located in Delhi because of its infrastructure and proximity to corporate and government leaders.

In China, Daniel C.K. Chow, a law professor who once worked for a multinational company there, has been instrumental in helping Ohio State navigate the country’s legal system.

Mr. Brustein has also reached out to faculty members who may not have worked in the gateway countries or overseas at all. He offers a variety of seed grants to spark faculty interest: one supports the development of research partnerships with counterparts at universities in key countries, another encourages the creation of study-abroad programs, and a third will help connect classrooms, through e-mail and videoconferencing, at Ohio State and overseas.

The grants, which have not yet been awarded, range from $2,000 to $10,000. Mr. Brustein was able to match funds from his office with money put up by other departments on the campus.

Rattan Lal, a professor of environment and natural resources who sits on the advisory committee for the Indian gateway, says the grants are a "gesture that the university thinks that this international work is a high priority."

Andrea Adam Moore, who represents the Free University of Berlin and the Ludwig Maximilian University in the United States, says one challenge lies in the reporting structure. At one of her institutions, her office is in the division that handles student exchanges, which can cause faculty members to overlook the role she can play in helping facilitate research partnerships.
On the other hand, she acknowledges that raising the liaison office's visibility back in Germany is "a double-edged sword." As a one-person operation, she can't spend too much time on basic logistics, like making travel arrangements. "I want to be known," she says, "but not too well known."

**Signs of Success**

Universities with liaison offices also say they spend a great deal of time making sure that their overseas directors don’t become isolated—that they stay abreast of and integrated in the institution's broader international strategy.

For instance, Ms. Northup, of Melbourne, talks and e-mails daily with her Australian counterparts and returns to the campus at least once a year. Ms. Brenn-White sends a weekly one-page update to her 12 universities about her activities.

One of the biggest challenges can be cost. Mr. Brustein puts the first-year cost of the gateway office in Shanghai's central business district at about $1-million. In its pilot phase, Ohio State has allocated $250,000 over six months for the Shanghai office.

At least one institution has pulled back from the liaison-office model in part because of the expense. Michigan State University has had an office in Beijing since 2006 and a branch campus in Dubai, but even though it plans to expand its activities to India, it is not setting up an office there.

Instead, says Jeffrey Riedinger, dean of international studies and programs, the university is appointing honorary "consuls-general," academics affiliated with Indian institutions who will help build research partnerships with Michigan State in key disciplines.

Another reason Michigan State decided against opening an Indian facility was geography, he says—it wasn't clear where best to locate a Michigan State center.

The university decided that "bricks and mortar was too costly" for an Indian liaison office, Mr. Riedinger says. If the "consuls-general" model works, Michigan State may extend it to its next target country, Brazil.

Other international educators say the upfront investment is worthwhile. Adam Clayton Powell IV, vice president for globalization at the University of Southern California, says the institution recoups much of the cost of its six liaison offices through new revenue in the form
of grants and tuition, as well as from the money saved on travel expenses. "The offices are surprisingly cost-effective," he says.

At Ohio State, the university has given itself no more than three years to make its gateway model self-supporting.

That requirement contributed to a crucial, and somewhat unusual, aspect of the gateways plan: programs in executive training and certification.

Faculty members are crafting course work, focusing on areas that are in demand in China as well as to meet the needs of Ohio-based multinational companies and dovetail those needs with the university's academic strengths, which include food safety, supply-chain management, and intellectual property.

Desmond Thio, a Shanghai-based alumnus who runs a Chinese medical site, says he thinks such programs would be welcomed. China needs as many as 100,000 more executives, he says.

Mr. Brustein expects the courses to make money. But they also fit with Ohio State's outreach mission as a land-grant institution. The university works closely with the Ohio Department of Development, which tries to attract foreign investment to Ohio and open new markets to Ohio exports.

Executive training is not the only new revenue source Ohio State hopes to tap with the opening of its global gateways. Already the university has seen an uptick in donations from China or from donors of Chinese origin, some specifically to support the Shanghai office.

Mr. Thio and Robert Benedetti, another alumnus, say the gateway has energized the university's graduates there, who had previously gathered mostly to watch football games. Many of the China-based alumni are in business and are working to help Ohio State navigate the country's complex legal and regulatory environment, says Mr. Benedetti, who works for an Ohio-based construction-management firm.

The gateway office, he says, "really is the shot in the arm, the catalyst, that we needed."