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Zaytuna College, First Muslim College In U.S., Opens In California

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BERKELEY, Calif. (RNS) Faatimah Knight's college decision came down to eight schools where she would have majored in English, or Zaytuna College, where she could study Islamic classical teachings in an environment that embraces all aspects of her Muslim faith. The Brooklyn native is part of the inaugural class of what Zaytuna's founders hope will be the country's first accredited, four-year Muslim liberal arts college -- a flagship of higher learning with an Islamic identity yet open to all faiths.

Knight, 18, chose Zaytuna, she said, because she wants to grow in her faith, learn more about the religion that inspired her parents to convert from Christianity and be able to defend Islam during a time of stepped-up suspicion.

Four years of college, Knight said, "has to bring me more than book smarts."

"I want to feel like I'm improving as a person. I want to feel like I'm improving in terms of my character," she said. "I'm almost positive that I can only get that here."

Knight, an aspiring writer, is one of 15 Zaytuna students who started classes Tuesday (Aug. 24). Zaytuna College grew out of a pilot seminary program at the Zaytuna Institute, which graduated a handful of students in 2008. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, an American-born convert from the San Francisco Bay Area who studied Islam abroad, started the institute in 1996, offering continuing education classes in Arabic and Islamic studies.

Yusuf began planning Zaytuna's transition to a full-fledged college two years ago with two colleagues: Imam Zaid Shakir, a Berkeley convert who studied Islam abroad; and Hatem Bazian, a professor at the University of California Berkeley and a Palestinian native who's lived in the Bay Area for nearly 27 years.

The three are among the best-known and most-respected Muslim scholars in America, said Zahra Billoo, the programs and outreach director at the Council on American-Islamic Relations' San Francisco Bay Area chapter.

The college will seek accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and founders hope to graduate students who can work in any profession, including serving the Muslim American community as imams, nonprofit managers and Islamic school teachers.

Co-founder Bazian said the college is needed because of a lack of native-born Muslim professionals with a strong understanding of their faith and the needs of U.S. Muslims.

"We feel the college is very important in that it provides a grounding for the community in its own tradition -- not in a sense to create a difference with the larger society, but to actually normalize its presence within the larger society, that there is no contradiction between being an American and being Muslim," Bazian said.

While Muslims have been in the U.S. for centuries, most immigrated here within the last 40 years, with 80 percent of U.S. Muslims arriving after 1980, said Farid Senzai, a member of Zaytuna's management committee and the research director at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a Michigan-based think tank focused on U.S. Muslims.

Over several generations, Muslim Americans have built an infrastructure of mosques, schools and advocacy organizations. Now, with a population estimated to range from 2 million to as many as 8 million, and growing financial stability, they're beginning to build academic institutions, Senzai said, just as Catholics and Jews did generations ago.

The college could help bridge the gap between different segments of the community, such as immigrants and native-born Muslims, said CAIR's Billoo. It could also provide ranks of homegrown imams to lead the country's estimated 2,000 mosques instead of foreign-born leaders who sometimes face cultural, language and generational gaps.

Zaytuna is offering two majors to start: Arabic language, and Islamic law and theology. There are plans to add advanced degrees, adult education classes and professional certificate programs in areas such as Islamic medical ethics, Islamic finance and religious training for imams and undergraduates.

Zaytuna, which means "olive tree" in Arabic, also hopes to be a vehicle for interfaith dialogue. The college was intentionally planted in progressive Berkeley, an intellectual hub with a sizable Muslim community. The college will be housed at the American Baptist Seminary of the West for five years until founders can establish its own campus.

The college can help promote cross-cultural understanding, when visitors "see it in action," said Senzai, who also teaches political science at Santa Clara University.

"In fact, these kinds of institutions in the long term are absolutely necessary for bridging the divide that currently exists and the misunderstanding that many have about Islam and Muslims," he said.