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Saudi women at local forum

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By Matt Rocheleau
Globe Correspondent

Thirty female undergraduate students from Saudi Arabia will be at Babson College in Wellesley from July 13 to 24 as part of the first U.S.-Saudi Women's Forum on Social Entrepreneurship.

Babson will host the forum's second of three sessions where students will work on group projects.

"It's not like a professor standing up in front of a classroom speaking. These are really highly-interactive classes," said Janelle Shubert director of The Center for Women's Leadership at Babson. "It's very much a coaching process."

The Babson women's center and The Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College partnered with Dal Al Hekma College and the global professional services firm ICF International to organize the forum. The women attend the college in in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The program is funded through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a program within the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

Susan McGee Bailey, the executive director of the Wellesley College centers, said the Saudi women will tour the Wellesley campus when they arrive July 11 and have a dinner there,\

"They will have a chance to see an all-women's college," said McGee Bailey.

"It seemed a wonderful extension of the work we're already doing internationally," she said. "It was sort of a natural fit for us. I think they'll get a view of the U.S. and of higher education and women in higher education that is different from what they've experienced."

Shubert attended the first session held in April at Dar Al Hekma College There, she said, 90 students explored what it means to be a social entrepreneur.

"It was fabulous," said Shubert. "These are incredibly intelligent young women."

Of those 90 students, 30 were chosen to make the trip to Babson based on applications they submitted.

The second session is designed to look more in depth at the business side of social entrepreneurship, she said. The third will be held in Saudi Arabia in December or January when the students will present their final projects to a group of judges.

Shubert said the projects will be implemented into the students' own communities with the expectation that they will continue their work after the forum ends.

Project ideas include creating recycling centers, improving education for young girls in fields like engineering and science and setting up education programs in

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early childhood health, she said.

The Saudi women will be accompanied by four of their school's professors. Nine Babson professors, three Wellesley College professors and 10 guest speakers who are social entrepreneurs themselves will work with the students.

Babson has had "lots of discussions" about sending their own students to Saudi Arabia through this partnership, said Shubert.

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