

Zaytuna becomes first accredited Muslim college

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [Apr 15, 2015](#) issue

Zaytuna College, a five-year-old institution in Berkeley, California, is now the first fully accredited Islamic university in America.

It was recognized in March by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, an academic organization that oversees public and private colleges and universities in the United States.

The accreditation means that Zaytuna, which owns two buildings and has 50 students and a faculty of 15, is officially an institution of higher learning. It is only a few blocks from its esteemed neighbor, the University of California, Berkeley.

“It really signifies that we have new possibilities of relationships with faculty colleagues across the nation,” said Colleen Keyes, Zaytuna’s vice president of academic affairs. “It puts us in a relationship with both undergraduate faculties and graduate seminaries and schools of theology, of which there are a lot here in Berkeley.”

Zaytuna’s students are both U.S.-born and foreign-born and come from Pakistani, Arabic, Turkish, African-American, and Latino backgrounds. All Zaytuna’s current students identify as Muslims, but there is no religious requirement for admission, Keyes said.

However, Zaytuna—the Arabic word for the olive tree—remains unique among American colleges and universities in that it requires students to learn Arabic so they can study Islamic texts, including the Qur’an, in their original forms. And it offers only one degree—a bachelor of arts in Islamic law and theology.

Students spend their entire first year immersed in a classic liberal arts curriculum that includes rhetoric, logic, English grammar, composition, and the great works of Western literature. At the same time, they study Arabic and Islamic law, history, science, and math. They must memorize and recite a chunk of the Qur’an before they can graduate, as well as perform community service.

Students “understand there is not a dichotomy between Islam and the West,” Keyes said. “The role of Muslims in America is to think about Islam in a non-Islamic environment and think about how we are American and Muslim at the same time.”

Male and female students take classes together, though they must promise not to date while at the school. Tuition is \$15,000 a year, and housing is an additional \$9,000.

Raja Ali, a 30-year-old Zaytuna sophomore, said she chose Zaytuna despite its lack of accreditation when she entered in 2013. But the school’s new status means a great deal to her.

“I just feel so much joy, and I am very excited about the future for the college and all the new students that will come,” she said. —Religion News Service