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U.S. Rotary scholars in Lebanon as part of cross-cultural awareness efforts

By **Lysandra Ohrstrom** Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: At a time when the name Lebanon sends shivers down the spines of many Westerners, the Beirut Cosmopolitan Rotary Club is [hosting](#) three visiting American scholars at AUB this year as part of its effort to improve cross-cultural awareness.

Under the Rotary umbrella there is a [network](#) of local clubs and a foundation, which offers over 1,000 full-year [academic scholarships](#) annually. Participants are chosen from a pool of post-graduates who submit applications to their district Rotary Club, specifying their area of interest and the foreign country where they wish to be based.

According to one Lebanese-American Rotary scholar Ben Zogby, few applicants express interest in studying in the Middle East.

"Most of the people I met at orientation (an annual [meeting](#) of all rotary scholars is held at the club's headquarters in Chicago) were going to Britain or Switzerland, which is fine. But the point of a Rotary [Scholarship](#) is to build bridges with countries who are in need of a productive [relationship](#) with the West, to foster a world citizenry."

Indeed Lebanon does benefit from hosting Rotary Scholars. An offshoot of Lebanon's Rotary Club is Rotaract, an organization geared toward 18-30-year-old Lebanese residents that teaches them professional skills, encourages community service, and offers general life guidance. According to Rotaract president Hourri Elmayan, young people see scholars as role models, and mutual exchange facilitates increased cultural understanding.

The Rotary Scholarship differs from governmental [financial aid](#) programs, which often stipulate that recipients must work for the public sector after completing their education.

Though there are no conditions accompanying a Rotary Scholarship, this year's participants all feel obliged to continue their relationship with the organization, and in doing so aim to change American perceptions about the Middle East in general and Lebanon specifically.

"I'm not so idealistic to think that my presence will cause a thaw in US-Arab relations, but hopefully when I go back to the [United States] and share my experience with other rotary members it might help them to view people as people and not as nationalities," Kristi Jones, a scholar from Ohio, told ***The Daily Star***.