

UB to participate in college fair in Baghdad

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Barbara Maryak, associate vice president for admissions, and Steven Boyd, director of...

BRIDGEPORT -- Barbara Maryak has the stamps of 54 nations in her passport, having traveled the world during her 32-year career in admissions at the University of Bridgeport.

On Saturday, the associate vice president for admissions adds a 55th. This one has her nervous. She's headed to Iraq.

"We have been told over and over again it's very secure, because we're guests of the government. We will be very well protected. I have to just keep saying that to myself," said Maryak.

Along with Steven Boyd, UB's director of international admissions, Maryak was invited by Iraq Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as part of his higher education initiative.

UB is among 20 U.S. colleges who accepted the invitation to recruit students in the war-torn nation. College officials from Canada and the United Kingdom are also making the trip.

The group will spend a week in Iraq, first in the International "Green Zone" in Baghdad, then two days up north in the Kurdish city of Sulaymaniya, home to the American University of Iraq.

"There will be a traditional college fair where students interested in studying with us can come and pick up materials. I have no idea how they handle security for that," said Maryak.

The trip is expected to include a welcome from Maliki and briefings from a host of government officials and academics who will explain Iraq's education system. Maryak said Iraq's higher educational institutions are trying to become part of the global community again.

The nation hopes to send 10,000 students a year abroad so they can help strengthen the nation's economy and government when they return.

"That's incredibly ambitious," said Maryak. She would be happy to get 10 students to attend UB, at first, and work her way up to 25.

More than one-quarter of UB's enrollment is international. Although UB has students from more than 80 nations, it does not have any Iraqi students. There is one Iranian student at the university's School of Naturopathic Medicine, according to John Daley, a university spokesman. In the mid-1970s when Iran was still ruled by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, UB was teeming with Iranian students who went on to become engineers at Sikorsky Aircraft and elsewhere.

"We try for balance in the student body and this would add to our diversity," said Maryak of the prospect for attracting Iraqi students. "It is exciting to be in on something that is new and opening up relationships between countries."

She said UB's location close to New York City helps when it comes to recruitment. Others on the trip include officials from Texas A&M, University of Chicago, University of Kentucky and University of Oregon.

Maryak said UB was among the schools invited by Iraq because of its international orientation, flavor and dimension. At first, she didn't realize the invitation came from Maliki himself.

She said the prospect of the trip makes her both excited and nervous.

"It's not that we haven't had some other close calls along the way. I was in India during a plague and in Cyprus when the country was invaded by Turks," Maryak explained. "I think we will do OK."

After Iraq, the UB team will go to Jordan, where the university has agreements with Al Hussein Bin Talal University in Ma'an and Princess Sumaya University for Technology in Jubaiha. The pair will meet with students at both universities, as well as several other colleges and high schools in the country.