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■ STUDENT VISAS

Foreigners often OK'd for school

The INS has not said whether any of the suspected terrorists held a student visa.

By Bill Douthat

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Foreigners with bankrolls and enrollments in vocational schools such as flight training centers are usually welcomed with open arms into the United States.

About 1 million foreign students are now enrolled in schools, universities, vocational centers and in industrial job-training programs, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service says.

The INS declined to comment on whether any of the suspected hijackers who trained in Florida flying schools came here with vocational visas.

The U.S. State Department issues thousands of "M-1" visas a year for foreigners accepted for enrollment in flight schools. The students must convince U.S. consular offices at home that they have the money to pay tuition and expenses during their stay and are likely to return to their home countries.

"These guys generally are from well-to-do families," said Jeffrey Devore, a West Palm Beach immigration attorney.

"If they show up at an embassy with family ties and financial support, there is a good chance they are going to get the visa."

From 6,000 to 7,000 M-1 visas are issued annually, with Japan having "far and away the highest number," said a State Department official who asked not to be identified.

In the budget year which ended Sept. 30, 1998 — the most recent data available — the State Department issued 1,154 M-1 visas to Japanese nationals. Saudi Arabia was second with 444 visas. Italy and the United Kingdom had about 330 visas each.

Flight schools start the process by sending applicants a form that confirms the foreigner is an accepted student. The foreigner takes the form to the U.S. embassy in his or her country as a basis for a request for a non-immigrant visa.

"They have to meet pretty high standards," said an official at the Phoenix East Aviation flight school in Daytona Beach, who asked not to be identified. "I assume the background check by the embassy is thorough."

The embassy interviews each applicant and checks the names against databases of people barred from entering the U.S., the State Department official said.

At least two suspected hijackers are believed to have had "B-1" or "B-2" visas. They are the most common visas issued. The former is for business use and the latter for tourism. They are good for six months and can be extended for another six months.

M-1 visas are good for one year or until the student's schooling is completed, whichever is sooner. Students must also show they have a fixed residence in their home country that they don't intend to abandon, said Miami immigration attorney Jeffrey Brauerman.

The U.S. has encouraged foreigners to study here, he said. "The purpose of the student visas was the opportunity for them to come and be taught our system," he said.

The Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach advertises another visa, the "J-1," which allows students to work part-time on campus.

Under the J-1 visa, students who complete their vocational training are barred for two years from applying to enter the U.S. as an immigrant. Students with M-1 visas can remain here after their schooling if they qualify and apply for residency.

The requirement is in place so that the students "share with their countrymen the knowledge, experience and impressions gained during their stay in the United States," the INS says.

Staff writer Larry Lipman contributed to this story.

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