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U.S. Diplomats Deny Visas to Many More Chinese Students Than Usual

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Chinese students seeking visas to study in the United States are being rejected by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing in much greater numbers than they were at this time last year, according to the U.S. State Department.

Government officials say applicants are being turned down for legitimate reasons, and they expect denials to decrease as the summer progresses. But some American universities are complaining of unfair treatment.

"If what we've been seeing for the last two to three weeks holds up, we are in for a tough summer," said Kenneth A. Rogers, associate dean of international programs at Indiana University at Bloomington and chairman of a consular-affairs panel for NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

More students come to the United States from China than from any other country, and Chinese students have long received extra scrutiny because many do not return to their homeland. Although that information is largely anecdotal, one survey by the National Science Foundation found that 91 percent of Chinese students earning doctorates in science and engineering planned to stay in the United States. In total, 54,466 students from China came to the United States in the 1999-2000 academic year.

Mr. Rogers said a number of students had been turned down this year because consular officers were making academic judgments. One student was denied a visa, he reported, because an official didn't think it made sense for him to attend a community college. In another decision, which was later reversed, a consular official told a student there was no such place as Indiana University-Purdue University.

Christopher Lamora, a consular-affairs spokesman at the State Department, said officers are required by law to look at applicants' academic history to ensure that their intentions to study are sincere. He gave the example of a 50-year-old doctor who tried to enroll in an aquaculture program. The university might conclude that he is well qualified, but a consular official may suspect that he's simply trying to get into the United States.

Mr. Lamora also said that a number of visa applicants had provided fake credentials or doctored I-20's, the form that universities use to certify admission.

"We do not second-guess a U.S. academic institution's decision to admit a particular foreign student," he said. "But the consular officer has an obligation to ensure that the person is going to the U.S. for the stated reason and that they are who they say they are."

The State Department normally does not release statistics on visa-denial rates. The U.S. Embassy in Beijing, one of five offices in China that issue visas, agreed to provide some data to illustrate the problems it has encountered, and to show that visa-denial rates are not as high as some suspect, Mr. Lamora said. "We have a responsibility to our own staffs who get harassed and harangued to put the record straight," he said.

Both the number of applications and the visa-denial rates at the embassy have jumped

this year. From May 15 through June 20 last year, the embassy received 2,579 applications for F-1 visas for students, and issued 2,102. During that same period this year, the embassy received 3,184 applications and issued 1,880. That means denial rates jumped from 18.5 percent to 41 percent.

Applicants for J-1 visas-for research scholars and professionals-fared even worse. From May 15 through June 20 last year, the embassy received 576 applications and granted 419 visas. This year, during that same period, it received 928 applications and granted 363 visas. The denial rate leaped from 27 percent to 61 percent.

Mr. Lamora said embassy officials offered two explanations. First, many more undergraduates and high-school students are applying for student visas. "It's going to be a lot more difficult for a younger person earlier in his or her education to explain to the consular officer why they're bagging the Chinese educational system and going to the U.S., and making a case for why they're coming back," he said.

In the J-1 visa category, embassy officials have seen an increase in people from training programs for Chinese managers and administrators, mainly in the public sector. They are seeking visas to either teach or take a course at an American university. Those people often are low paid and have poor English skills, and are sometimes ill-suited for the proposed work, Mr. Lamora said.

Still, embassy officials expect that by the end of the summer, the overall visa-approval rate should match last year's, which was 65 percent, Mr. Lamora said. Lawrence H. Bell, director of international education at the University of Colorado at Denver and the East Asia liaison for the NAFSA consular-affairs panel, said that's probably because many applicants are able to secure a visa on the second or third try.

Still, many academics are frustrated by what they consider arbitrary decision making. This past academic year, 9 of 10 Chinese undergraduates who were accepted into an exchange program between Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and Hunan University were denied visas. Yet just a few days earlier, officials at the Beijing embassy who met with university representatives said the program looked strong, said Timothy Diemer, the international-services director at Indiana. The visa denials soured Hunan on the program, he added.

American academics say visa denials hurt more than just the students. Three of five Chinese teaching assistants expected this fall in Michigan State University's department of statistics and probability failed to get visas. As a result, said James Stapleton, director of the graduate program, the department will probably have to cancel some review sections.

Two female employees in the Shanghai consulate seem particularly hard on visa applicants, academics say. Embassy officials did not comment on specific employees, but Mr. Lamora said most of the consular officers issuing visas are relatively new. "We acknowledge that consistency and training are challenges," he said, but added that all applications are reviewed by a senior official.

Mr. Rogers said he and others were working with David Hopper, the consul general in

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Beijing, to try to better educate embassy staff members on how university admissions decisions are made. And the State Department has sent out at least two cables outlining what constitutes a valid visa denial.

Because the State Department is reluctant to release data, Mr. Rogers said universities must keep better track of such information if they want to document unfair or inconsistent treatment. NAFSA's Web site, <http://www.nafsa.org> offers guidance for students seeking visas and for their advisers.

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