

About Education

Iranians' Plight Puts a Spotlight On U.S. Colleges

By FRED M. HECHINGER

THE revolution in Iran has thrown thousands of Iranian students in the United States into a state of acute financial crisis. At the same time, their plight has raised serious questions about the practices of some American schools in enticing foreign students to their campuses. The situation, it is feared, may have far-reaching effects on foreign-student affairs.

Some observers view the tactics of a number of financially shaky colleges as a threat to America's reputation as one of the world's leading exporters of academic skills. The Justice Department, moreover, plans to ask questions not only about the fiscal and academic background of foreign students, but about their political behavior.

Estimates of the number of Iranian students in the United States range from an official count of 37,000 to the more likely unofficial total of 50,000, and a frequently mentioned guess of 75,000. That means that somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of all foreign students in this country come from a single source — Iran. Next in number is Taiwan with 13,650; followed by Nigeria, 13,510; Canada, 12,600; Hong Kong, 12,100; India, 9,080; and Japan, 9,050.

While many of the 235,000 foreign students on American campuses are of modest means, often on scholarships, the Iranians were allowed to receive \$1,000 a month to pay for their education, making them attractive to many colleges that have found it difficult to fill vacancies. For the students, and subsequently for the colleges, the crunch came three months ago when Iranian banks halted these payments. The crisis was highlighted when Windham College, in Vermont, which had augmented its meagre complement of 180 American students with 75 Iranians had to go out of business last December.

The "Iranian problem" was compounded when, in the midst of the upheaval in Teheran, Iranian students lashed out violently against members of the Shah's family in Beverly Hills. Ironically, while most Iranian students come from wealthy homes, they have been visible mainly as demonstrators against the Shah, thus antagonizing some conservative American communities.

Growing hostility, on and off campus, was reported as early as a year ago in college towns in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Utah and California. For example, Fresno State University of California last year revoked the right of an Iranian student association to organize on campus. Bee County College in Texas expelled 40 Iranian students for taking over a building.

But the relationship between the American campus and the Iranian students raises more fundamental questions about the role of foreign students and the responsibility of American higher education. The temptation to view foreign

students as a bonanza, or even a financial life saver, may become harder to resist in the lean years ahead.

In the view of those who support the concept of an international consciousness, the host campus gains much from the presence of students from other countries and cultures, while the foreign visitors not only benefit from firsthand acquaintance with a major democratic power but from the teachings offered by an advanced industrial nation. The search for science and engineering skills is understandably intense among young people from the Middle East.

Spokesmen for the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs point out that the selection process of these students, as well as their placement on American campuses, tend to be haphazard. Fred Lockyear, of the College Entrance Examination Board and an adviser to the N.A.F.S.A., reports that because of the large volume of student visa applications in Teheran, where some 14,000 visas were issued in a recent 12-month period, consular officers spend an average of only three minutes with each prospective student. These officers, in turn, insist that those who sign the required documents be responsible for insuring that the applicants' grades and finances are in order. But there is evidence that blank forms, to be filled in by the students themselves, could be bought routinely for about \$500.

There apparently was no dearth of American colleges ready to accept paying Iranian customers, including some who had not even completed high school. College recruiters also were reported to have regularly wined and dined an embassy official of another less-affluent Middle Eastern country to have him channel scholarship-supported students to their campuses.

In the view of Hugh Jenkins, executive vice president of the N.A.F.S.A., it is a serious disservice to foreign students to be dumped in large numbers on campuses that are unable to absorb them. He cited one instance of a college that enrolled 55 foreign students of whom 50 were from Iran.

The University of Southern California is reported to enroll 900 Iranians; the University of Southwestern Louisiana, 600; Woodbury College in Los Angeles (enrollment 2,000), 300. One small college in Oklahoma, bolstered its total enrollment of 900 with 400 Iranians.

Such concentrations make a mockery of any claim that the foreign students are part of an American or cosmopolitan educational environment; they are instead more likely to constitute a foreign block.

The danger at a time of declining enrollments, said Mr. Lockyear, is an increase in "body-hunting," turning college selection into marketing, and admissions officers into sales representatives. Even with the Iranian "market" now in doubt, the problem extends to many other countries, among them Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The Justice Department has responded by ordering a head count of foreign students and proposing that students who ask for an extension of their stay be required to answer questions about their academic and financial conditions. The added question that worries some observers is whether the student "has engaged in any activity which would be inconsistent with his continued stay in the U.S." This is considered by some as an ominous governmental intrusion, but even opponents admit that lack of responsibility has offered provocation.

An additional concern is that some foreign students who find themselves exploited, misunderstood, antagonized or, in some instances, abandoned by the institutions that recruited them, will go home with a grudge against America. That would be the ultimate irony in an endeavor intended to create understanding and friendship.