Probe turns up phony marriages

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LAFAYETTE — An immigration official said a six-month investigation has turned up at least 18 phony marriages that were arranged to allow foreigners to remain in the U.S.

"We have identified 18 fraudulent marriages, and we figure there's at least 30," said Dave Lambert of New Orleans, district director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

On Tuesday, federal agents rounded up four men, including the alleged marriage broker and three University of Southwestern Louisiana students from the Middle East accused of participating in the marriage ring, he said. They have all been released either on bond or on their own recognizance.

Lambert said the agents had planned to make more arrests in Lafayette on Tuesday, but the other aliens were tipped off.

"As soon as we hit the first ones, word spread like wildfire," he said. "The rest of the aliens had hidden."

A marriage to a native U.S. citizen allows foreigners to remain in this country to receive a permanent visa, according to federal officials. After a foreigner marries and applies for a visa, an interview is conducted to determine whether the marriage is legitimate.

Lambert said the case was developed last year during such an interview when discrepancies began showing up in spouses' answers to routine questions. INS investigators began questioning neighbors of the foreigners to learn of their daily habits, he said.

The investigation has not reached a grand jury yet, he said.

But prosecution is planned for those citizens who married the aliens, he said, and the aliens themselves stand to be deported.

He said the practice is becoming more of a problem. Citizens agree to marry someone from another country for $1,000 to $1,500, repeat their vows and eventually go separate ways, he said. In this case, it was women who married men from the Middle East, mostly students.

"We believe 25 percent of all marriages entered into between aliens and citizens are fraudulent," he said.

But the INS doesn't have enough investigators to check out all cases of possible fraud, Lambert added.

He said some women in college agree to the bogus marriages out of sympathy for men who don't want to leave the country.

"A lot of women feel sorry for their classmates," he said. "A lot of them are doing it just to help."

But that help can lead to trouble, up to $10,000 in fines and five years in jail for defrauding the government, he said.

"It's a very grave federal offense and something not to be entered into lightly," he said.

Janet Graham, INS spokeswoman in Washington, D.C., said the practice is unfair to the 1.8 million people in other countries seeking to come to the U.S.

Many of those waiting to obtain immigration visas to the U.S. must wait in another country for as many as eight years, she said.