

‘We Need High-Skill Immigration’

Rebuttals to business coalition claims

BY GENE NELSON, PH.D.

According to the Illinois Business Immigration Coalition, the following claims justify increasing levels of high-skilled immigrants into the U.S. workforce. Here are four claims and their rebuttals:

1. The U.S. is facing a shortage of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) workers. By 2018, there will be more than 220,000 advanced-degree STEM jobs that will not be filled, even if every single American STEM graduate finds a job.

2. Every 100 immigrants who earn advanced degrees in the U.S. and then stay to work in technical fields create 262 jobs for American workers.

3. The foreign-born make up 27 percent of the U.S. workforce with a doctoral degree, and are strongly concentrated in occupations associated with high skill levels—medical scientists (43 percent), physicists (25 percent), or economists (29 percent).

4. One quarter of high-tech startups have at least one immigrant founder. <http://www.illinoisbic.biz/GettheFacts.aspx#!prettyPhoto>

Let’s examine these claims in detail.

First, the real shortage is positions for American-born science and engineering (STEM) students that make use of their training and experience, with at least three Americans seeking employment in STEM fields for every opening. High-tech industries are notorious for practicing employment/age discrimination, cutting employees’ positions before the workers reach age 40. The science and engineering talent glut, even at the Ph.D. level, is longstanding. The National Academies of Science published *The Invisible University — Postdoctoral Education in the United States*, a 1969 study that documented talent gluts in many science and engineering fields as evidenced by a large and growing population of postdoctoral appointees. These are “holding pattern” positions for STEM Ph.D. holders with low pay and no guarantee of renewal once a research grant runs out. This over-300-page study was cosponsored by NASA.

Gene Nelson, a contributor to The Social Contract, has testified twice before the U.S. House of Representatives and twice before the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) regarding the harms to American citizens of the controversial H-1B Visa program.

Second, the “alphabet soup” of work visa programs such as H-1B, L-1, B-1, and the never-passed-by-Congress OPT extension to the F-1 (student) visa programs have morphed into bloated, government-sanctioned foreign employee preference programs. Free-market advocate and Nobel economics laureate Milton Friedman noted that the H-1B Visa program was a “government subsidy” program. Dr. Friedman observed that employers were able to obtain higher-skilled workers for below-market wages. The work visa programs were designed to supply a lower-cost and pliant workforce in response to employer-interest lobbying. Sponsorship for permanent residency is accomplished by employers. In most cases, a foreigner’s work visa is conditioned upon being continuously employed. The result is a system of “carrots and sticks” that achieve employers’ cost reduction goals via a system akin to indentured servitude. There is no place for American citizens in this massive (and immoral) scheme.

Third, there are no numerical caps on F-1 (student) visas, likely in response to special-interest lobbying. The F-1 visas should be subject to annual caps. As noted above, young foreign-born Ph.D.s are displacing American citizen Ph.D.s in large numbers. This employer practice harms American innovation in direct and indirect ways. The displaced Americans, previously employed in “head of household” jobs with benefits, are forced to take survival-level positions that make scant use of their training or experience. Often these survival-level jobs lack even rudimentary benefits. Colleges and universities obtained a unique legislative “carve-out” in 1976 via the controversial “Eilberg Amendment.” These institutions of higher education are able to hire *unlimited numbers* of college professors and researchers. To support the *national* interest, instead of *special* interests, this 1976 legislation—and the creation of the H-1B Visa in 1990—should be immediately repealed.

Fourth, this is a very misleading statistic. When the large numbers of immigrant-founded companies that perform low-value-added services such as assembling personal computers are not included from the total, the number of so-called immigrant-founded high-tech startups is dramatically reduced. In marked contrast to most other nations, native-born Americans excel at both innovation and entrepreneurship when presented with a playing field that does not offer special advantages to foreign-born workers. ■