



Business leaders call for more skilled worker visas

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Despite New Jersey's wealth of educated immigrants and an unemployment rate above 9 percent, the state would greatly benefit from visa-law reforms that allow more skilled foreigners to work here, speakers at a conference in Princeton said Monday.

While the nation is often stuck in a polarizing debate over immigration, business executives, academics and policy advocates at the forum at the Institute for Advanced Study had few doubts that an increase in the number of work visas available for top talent from overseas would help develop the state and national economies, and create jobs.

"We are a public company, we are a commercial enterprise, and our goal is to be the best," said Seifi Ghasemi, chairman and chief executive officer of Rockwood Holdings Inc., a Princeton-based producer of specialty inorganic chemicals. "For us, it's essential to have access to, and be able to attract, the very best to our company."

He and other speakers at the forum — titled "The Innovation Bridge — Enhancing American Competitiveness and Job Creation Through Smart Immigration" — said the labor market is now so globalized that any barriers to entry that hinder talented workers from coming to the United States, or staying in the country after they are educated, will compel them to go elsewhere. That would mean the United States and its companies are less competitive in the global market, they said.

New Jersey companies collectively already employ more workers with H1-B work visas than all but three other states, said Anastasia R. Mann, director of the Rutgers Eagleton program on Immigration and Democracy. H1-Bs are given to workers with skills and experience in demand in the United States.

Yet U.S. immigration authorities grant only 65,000 such visas each year, down from 195,000 a decade ago, meaning many employers cannot secure visas for foreign workers, speakers said.

"In the past, the U.S. was the only option" for ambitious, talented students, said J. Stewart Smith, dean of research at Princeton University. He said two-thirds of the university's post-doctoral students are on temporary visas. "Other countries are now developing, and they [students] have other options than the U.S."

Where the state ranks

A study by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University found that New Jersey had the fourth-highest number of workers holding H1-B visas, temporary work papers issued to those who have a skill in short supply.

Here is how U.S. states stack up by the number of visas and average salary

1. California 65,600 \$85,300
2. New York 41,700 \$90,400
3. Texas 31,400 \$75,400
4. New Jersey 23,600 \$73,900
5. Illinois 18,600 \$74,300
6. Florida 15,200 \$70,200
7. Massachusetts 14,700 \$79,400
8. Pennsylvania 12,900 \$73,200
9. Washington 11,300 \$89,400
10. 10. Virginia 11,000 \$74,300

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Speakers called for a variety of solutions, including an increase in the number of H1-Bs issued and the creation of a new type of visa granted to foreign entrepreneurs who invest in the United States and create jobs here. Another proposal would create a visa available to science, technology, engineering and math students when they graduate.

The forum was held amid increasing intensity in the immigration debate. A week ago, President Obama said he would stop deporting young undocumented immigrants and said they will be able to work. On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down parts of the controversial Arizona immigration law.

Still, most of the discussion on Tuesday focused on highly skilled workers, rather than the larger — and more controversial — population of low-end workers that too many people characterize as the core of the immigration debate.

Darrell West, vice president and director of governance studies at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, said immigration reform would help the economy by increasing the supply of workers at both ends of the skill spectrum.

He said research shows that the conventional argument against immigration — that an influx of immigrant workers would take jobs away from U.S. workers already struggling amid high unemployment — does not hold up. Despite the high jobless rate, many industries have a worker shortage or already rely on foreign workers, West said.

For example, Microsoft "reports that it had 4,551 unfilled job positions" due to difficulty of hiring scientists and engineers, he said. About three-quarters of the nation's current farm workers come from outside the United States, and the restaurant industry expects demand for food service workers to far outstrip supply in the next decade, he said.

"In industry after industry we are seeing shortages, and it's creating a problem with economic growth," West said.

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