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How immigration reform could boost our national defense

By Gary Shapiro

Encouraging bright minds to stay in the United States after graduation, grow businesses and create jobs is critical to secure our country's position as a high-tech hub and global leader in innovation. It's also important to our national security.

Recently, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel [proposed military spending cuts](#) that would reduce the size of the U.S. Army to pre-World War II levels, while investing in new technologies, [saying](#), "We must maintain our technological edge over potential adversaries." Many of the tools we need to keep our country safe are born of the minds of tech innovators. But political leaders appear to have given little thought to the national security ramifications of inaction on this issue. It's time for our politicians to drop their protectionist rhetoric and allow those who come to the United States to study and earn graduate degrees in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields to stay, grow businesses and create.

Our nation's defense capabilities are increasingly dependent on the latest advances in science and technology. Too often we take for granted that the United States has the world's most sophisticated communications, weaponry and aerospace technology and equipment. When we lose STEM students, we lose access to their future innovations. Sending top STEM talent away based on outdated immigration laws may actually be putting us in danger.

President Obama has repeatedly stressed the need to allow foreign graduate students who get STEM degrees in the United States to stay here and become citizens. But he insists that any action be tied to comprehensive immigration reform. Republicans agree on the need to grant citizenship to U.S.-educated STEM immigrants, but disagree with Democrats on both the importance and details of comprehensive immigration reform.

Despite these differences, last June the Senate [passed comprehensive immigration reform legislation](#) by a vote of 68-32. The legislation included provisions allowing immigrants with advanced STEM degrees to become U.S. citizens. Yet the legislation now languishes in the House. Republicans are concerned about leaving enforcement of overall immigration legislation to a president they feel selectively enforces laws. More, they fear Tea Party retribution if they act to solve one of the nation's biggest problems. Perhaps the stalemate would end if both parties considered how continued deportation of STEM graduate students will cripple our national security?

A 2013 National Foundation for American Policy [study](#) found that as many as 70 percent of students in some key STEM university graduate programs in the United States are foreign-born. Much of the [\\$6 billion](#) in taxpayer money given by the National Science Foundation to STEM research in U.S. universities each year is spent on research conducted by these foreign students. And a 2012 Congressional Research Service [study](#) found that the ranks of foreign-born grad students in the United States are multiplying: In 1990 we had just over 91,000 foreign graduate students, while in 2009 we hosted almost 149,000 foreign graduate students studying in the United States.

Our country is investing a significant amount of taxpayer money into foreign-born students and their research, yet once they graduate, we kick them out of the country. Meanwhile, STEM graduates who are U.S. citizens are typically drawn to Silicon Valley, big companies, start-ups or academic institutions. This leaves a huge gap in national defense, where the need for STEM expertise is arguably greatest.

International defense contractor BAE's outgoing U.S. CEO Linda Hudson recently [spoke](#) about immigration reform and the defense industry's hiring problem. "For the most part, in defense we are not permitted to hire foreign nationals," she said. "I cannot help but wonder if hobbling our ability to hire top scientists, mathematicians, programmers, and engineers who happen to have been born on foreign soil doesn't carry national security risks of its own." Hudson has been an outspoken proponent of the benefits of immigration reform, arguing for a path to citizenship for foreign students who want to stay and work in the United States.

We cannot let politics block action critical to preserving our national defense. Congress must act, and do so quickly. We must encourage foreign students getting STEM graduate degrees from our best universities to stay here, providing them a quick pathway to citizenship. More, we have to establish mechanisms so these bright minds are able to get the necessary security clearance to work in the U.S. defense industry.

The security and future of our nation depend on a strong military, one that leads the world in technological capability. Yet unless we open our eyes and figure out a way to utilize the talent we do have, we lack the incoming human capital to maintain our edge. It is past time for the House to pass immigration reform and get our country back on track. This isn't simply an economic issue – our national defense depends on it.

Shapiro is president and CEO of the Consumer Electronics Association, the U.S. trade association representing more than 2,000 consumer electronics companies, and author of [Ninja Innovation: The Ten Killer Strategies of the World's Most Successful Businesses](#) and [The Comeback: How Innovation Will Restore the American Dream](#). Find him on [Twitter](#).

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