

International Students, Skilled Immigrants And Comprehensive Immigration Reform

by [Marlene M. Johnson and Stuart Anderson](#)

Looking ahead to next year, it has become increasingly important that concerns about the economy not deter lawmakers from ensuring that reforms to attract and retain highly educated, highly skilled foreign nationals are included in comprehensive immigration reform legislation. Illegal immigration issues have dominated the debate, but the reality is that without addressing our broken legal immigration system, we will short-change ourselves in the long run. Keeping the United States a welcoming place for talented students and workers from around the world will be crucial to our economic recovery and our future ability to innovate, compete, and thrive in the global economy.

In an economic downturn, the temptation to lower the blinds and close the doors is strong. But in an age when work can be sent to other countries with the click of a mouse such an approach simply will not work. Many studies, and the experience of countless U.S. companies, have shown that hiring talented foreign workers boosts innovation and drives job creation. It also supports local economies. Foreign-born professionals buy cars and houses and pay tuition for their kids. At our universities, they teach our students, helping us develop our own talent pool for the jobs of tomorrow, and they collaborate with our faculty in the sciences, medicine, and other important fields. Turning away people with the skills our country needs denies us a much-needed resource to support our economic recovery. No country can be an island in the global economy – not even one as large as the United States.

Talented people from other countries often first come to the United States as foreign students. By the time they graduate from our colleges and universities, they have spent years investing in acquiring the best education in the world, generally in fields like engineering and the sciences, where they make up half to two-thirds of the graduate students. Some of these foreign graduates want to contribute their skills and knowledge in the United States, but increasingly they are going home or to other countries instead because our immigration system makes it too difficult for them to stay – even though it is in our interest to help them do so.

To keep them, and to attract other highly educated workers from other countries that U.S. employers need to fill key positions, we must do two things. First, the enormous backlogs and wait times that plague the green card system must be addressed, and there must be a better path to green card status for those foreign graduates of our colleges and universities who wish to stay in the United States and whose talent and skills are important to our economy. Exempting from employment-based green card quotas foreign students who receive a U.S. master's degree or higher; eliminating the per-country limits that impede, in particular, Indian and Chinese professionals; and providing additional employment visas for backlog relief would constitute major steps in addressing this problem.

Second, we must maintain and improve the H-1B temporary visa system, the primary way for skilled foreign nationals to pursue employment in the United States. Today, H-1B visas serve as a way station for those who really seek immigrant status but are stuck in the long green card line for 6 to 12 years. Fixing the green card system will take pressure off the H-1B system, but we will still need a system that can accommodate temporary, high-skill workers. At the same time, where abuses exist with H-1B visas they must be addressed. We must realize it does not make sense in a global competition for highly educated and talented workers to turn away these individuals, many of whom will go to work for companies in other countries that directly compete with our own.

Any effort to address the question of what kind of immigration system the United States needs must begin with an understanding that the mobility of individuals and ideas across borders has profoundly changed. People today possess myriad options for study, employment, and life in countries across the globe. Many nations are aggressively recruiting high-skilled foreign professionals and students, adjusting immigration and work laws to create incentives for them. People, like technology and information, are crossing borders with unprecedented freedom and flexibility. Our immigration laws and visa policy must catch up to these new realities, and must support a climate that encourages the contributions of foreign talent. In the global economy, our future depends on it.

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