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Keeping Talent America Trains

A study shows that foreign grads don't steal American jobs.

President Trump says he supports more legal immigration based on merit. If he means it, he should scotch a mooted labor regulation that would restrict temporary visas for high-skilled foreign graduates of U.S. universities.

“I want people to come into our country, in the largest numbers ever, but they have to come in legally,” Mr. Trump said in his State of the Union address, adding “we need people in our country because our unemployment numbers are so low.”

Excellent point. The U.S. has a record 7.3 million job openings, yet restrictionists in the Department of Homeland Security are promoting a new regulation under the guise of “practical training reform” to “improve protections” for Americans “who may be negatively impacted” by the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program, according to the agency’s regulatory agenda. OPT allows eligible foreign students to work in their degree field for up to 12 months after graduation and up to three years if they graduate with science, technology, engineering or math (STEM) degrees.

While H-1B visas for high-skilled foreign workers are limited to 85,000 per year, there’s no cap on OPT participants. The program accepted some 172,000 STEM applicants in 2016. Since OPT STEM graduates also get several chances at the annual H-1B lottery, OPT provides a relief valve for employers who can’t find enough workers in the strong economy. Those workers help companies grow and increase opportunities for Americans.

A new National Foundation for American Policy study offers data to prove the point. Economist Madeline Zavodny of the University of North Florida examined OPT data from 2008 through 2016 when the unemployment rate for college graduates averaged 3.6% compared to 7.3% for all workers. Far from stealing American jobs, Ms. Zavodny found that more OPT workers in a STEM field are associated with lower unemployment among domestic workers and that “U.S. employers are more likely to turn to foreign student workers when U.S. workers are scarcer.” Unemployment rates were also lower in metro areas with more OPT workers.

The program can also help U.S. colleges and universities that have been losing talented foreign students because of uncertainty caused by President Trump's immigration policies. According to the National Foundation for American Policy, the number of Indian students enrolled in U.S. graduate-level computer science and engineering programs fell by 21% between 2016 and 2017.

Mr. Trump wants the U.S. to dominate cutting-edge fields, but restrictive immigration policies are making the U.S. less competitive. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has introduced an expedited two-week permit for foreign tech workers, and his government has erected billboards in Silicon Valley reading "H-1B Problems? Pivot to Canada."

American and foreign tech firms are expanding in Toronto and Vancouver where they can find high-skilled workers. Many restrictionists in the White House are opposed to more immigration for cultural reasons, but we assume the President doesn't want to export more U.S. jobs and businesses to Canada. A regulation to send foreign students home too soon would do precisely that.

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