By Stuart Anderson

Debunking Myths About International Students and Highly Skilled Immigrants

WITH TWO SIDES TO EVERY DEBATE, it's essential to consider the other side's point of view to challenge them effectively. To advance positive policies on the admission of international students and highly skilled professionals to the United States, supporters must address the key arguments of opponents. The arguments center on three questions: Do international students crowd out U.S. students who want to attend college? Do foreign-born professionals on H-1B temporary work visas discourage U.S. students from entering science, math, and technology-related fields? And should the United States compel international students to go home so as to prevent a "brain drain" from poorer countries? These questions are at the core of the debate between those who support policies to welcome international students and highly skilled immigrants and those who don't. Answering them with this mindset may assist international educators in framing their arguments to help deter opponents and foster greater support for international students and highly skilled immigrants to share their talents with the United States.

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Do International Students Crowd Out U.S. Students Who Want to Attend College?

Research shows there is no evidence that U.S. students are not able to attend engineering or other graduate-level programs in the United States due to the presence of international students. While the enrollment of international students has increased over the past few decades, so has the enrollment of U.S. citizens and permanent residents.

Examining all U.S. graduate programs from 1982 through 1995, Mark Regets of the National Science Foundation found no sign that U.S. citizens were displaced in graduate programs by international students. Increases in the number of international students in a graduate department were associated with increases, not decreases, in the enrollment of U.S. citizens and permanent residents—about one extra U.S.

student for every three extra international students. A rise in enrollment for one group that is associated with enrollment increases for all groups is "a result inconsistent with displacement," notes Regets.[1]

Other research has produced similar conclusions. Examining degree granting over a period of years (1965–2001), economists Keith Maskus, Aaditya Mattoo, and Gnanaraj Chellaraj found, "The number of PhDs granted to undergraduates of U.S. institutions, most of whom were U.S. citizens, did not change much during this period, while there was a substantial growth in the number of foreign bachelor's graduates obtaining U.S. doctorates. Thus the change in proportion is mostly due to the expansion of PhD programs, with a majority of the new slots being taken for foreign students rather than through substitution."[2]

The economists concluded, "Foreign students, skilled immigrants, and doctorates in science and engineering play a major role in driving scientific innovation in the United States." The bottom line: "reducing foreign students by tighter enforcement of visa restraints could reduce innovative activity significantly" in the United States.[3]

The issue of minority applicants is sensitive. However, a joint study by the Association of American Universities and the Association of Graduate Schools found no evidence international students harm U.S. minority applicants. The study concluded, "[The] acceptance and enrollment rates of minority applicants are significantly higher in comparison to those of non-U.S. citizen applicants . . . [T]his finding does suggest that institutions do show a preference for admitting U.S. minority applicants rather than non-U.S. citizen applicants."[4]

Other data support the findings cited above. Data from the National Science Foundation show that between 1980 and 2000, the share of black Americans in science and engineering (S&E) occupations more than doubled from 2.6 percent to 6.9 percent, as did the share of women, from 11.6 percent to 24.7 percent. This happened at the same time that "the percentage of foreign-born college graduates (including both U.S. and foreign degreed) in S&E jobs increased from 11.2 percent in 1980 to 19.3 percent in 2000," according to the National Science Foundation.[5]

Do Foreign-Born Professionals With H-1Bs Hinder U.S. Students From Pursuing Scientific and Technical Professions?

Some have argued that U.S. students are not entering high technology fields because of the annual flow of H-1B visa holders. Despite this assertion, there is no evidence that American college students, never mind high school students, are watching or making career decisions based on something as esoteric as the annual H-1B visa numbers. If they *were* paying attention to immigration policy, then the students would know H-1B visa fees have funded scholarships in technology-related fields for more than 50,000 American college students since 1999.[6] Moreover, H-1B visas represent a tiny proportion of the overall U.S. labor force—only about 0.07 percent of the U.S. labor force.[7]

Given the innovations and productivity increases that can come from skilled professionals, foreign-born scientists and engineers are likely to complement the skills of Americans and increase employment opportunities. It is easy to forget that many of the jobs some argue should now be protected did not even exist 30 years ago.

Preventing high-skilled foreign nationals from working in the United States will not help U.S. students. It will harm them. Encouraging employers to hire foreign nationals overseas, rather than in America, will push capital from the United States to locations where the foreign talent is allowed to be hired. The entrepreneurship we have witnessed from skilled immigrants would also be lost. As the United States loses its leadership in technology fields, there would likely be even less interest in U.S. students pursuing these fields. Finally, without international students, many graduate programs in science and engineering at U.S. universities would have insufficient numbers to sustain themselves.

American young people still aspire to careers in science and technology fields and pursue these dreams. They are not deterred from studying math, science, or engineering by the presence of foreigners in these fields. If U.S. students are so fearful of competition,

then why have so many chosen such highly competitive fields as law and finance?

Foreign-born athletes such as the St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols and the Dallas Mavericks forward Dirk Nowitzki are visible on American television, yet that has not prevented American kids from playing baseball or basketball. The argument that U.S. students are so afraid of competition they will not enter technology-related fields falls apart under scrutiny.

Should the United States Compel International Students to Go Home So As to Prevent a "Brain Drain" from Poorer Countries?

Even individuals who otherwise support a liberal immigration policy can be heard making the argument that the U.S. government should not allow international students to stay in the United States after completing degrees in their fields. The argument is that if an individual stays in America after completing his or her studies that is a loss to the student's home country.

However, this argument about "brain drain" rests on false premises and ignores the role immigrants can play in their home countries after achieving success in the United States. If an international student stays in America and becomes successful, he or she will likely maintain ties to his or her home nation by returning to invest in a business, establishing export ties, or conducting charity work, as has been done by many successful Indian Americans, such as Vinod Khosla, a cofounder of Sun Microsystems. They will also retain family ties that will keep them connected to their native land.

In contrast, if an international student returns to their home country right after graduation, he or she may possess limited skills to make a major impact. This is particularly the case if the country the student returns to is run by corrupt or inept leaders who limit economic opportunities for entrepreneurs or those with creative talent. Even students educated in their home countries may have gone to school with the specific intention to earn money abroad to help support their families. In the case of nurses who are educated in the Philippines, if the option of working overseas were denied they likely would not have trained as nurses in the first place.

There is nothing wrong—and indeed much that is positive—with international students voluntarily choosing to return to their home country after earning a degree in the United States. But there is also nothing wrong with such individuals deciding to stay in America if they can make a positive contribution and achieve gainful employment. The reality is that those international students who desire to leave their home—the most ambitious—will go to other countries if they are not allowed to stay in the United States. Rather than attempting to choose for an individual whether or not they would be "better off" in their home country, the United States should err on the side of freedom. **IE**

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Endnotes

[1] Mark Regets, "Research Issues in the International Migration of Highly Skilled Workers: A Perspective with Data from the United States," Working Paper, SRS 07-203, June 2007, 11.

[2] Gnanaraj Chellaraj, Keith E. Maskus, and Aaditya Mattoo, "The Contribution of Skilled Immigration and International Graduate Students to U.S. Innovation," March 17, 2005, 9.

[3] Ibid., 9.

[4] Association of Graduate Schools, "Participation in Doctoral Education at Major Research Universities by U.S. Citizens, Women, and Underrepresented Minorities," vol. 1, no. 1 (April 1993), 2–3.

[5] National Science Board, 2006 *Science and Engineering Indicators* (Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation, 2006), 3–19.

[6] FY 2010 National Science Foundation Budget Request to Congress, EHR-20-21.

[7] See *H-1B Visas by the Numbers: 2010 and Beyond*, National Foundation for American Policy, March 2010.