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Immigration bill could help foreign students stay in Michigan after graduation

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WASHINGTON — Two years after Michigan launched a unique initiative to keep international students in the state after they graduate from Michigan State University and other schools, officials are hoping to get a boost to that effort from proposed changes to federal immigration law.

The sweeping immigration bill that passed the Senate in June and faces an uncertain future in the House would make it easier for foreign students in the science, engineering, technology or math (STEM) fields to get to, and stay in, the United States after graduation.

“Graduate students, especially in the STEM fields, are a key element of the enterprise for basic research that drives the development of the next technologies,” said Mark Burnham, MSU’s vice president for government affairs, who has lobbied Congress on the issue. “And we’d like to keep that talent here.”

Although only 6 percent of Michigan’s population is foreign-born, immigrants have launched nearly one-third of the high-tech firms created in the state in the past decade, according to a report from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

More than half of Michigan’s doctoral students and as many as 40 percent of students pursuing a master’s degree in a STEM field come from other countries, according to Gov. Rick Snyder.

“These talented people are innovators and risk takers and ultimately, job creators, who can help our state and national economies grow and prosper,” Snyder has said.

That’s one reason that the state has an international student retention program. Started in southeast Michigan in 2011 and expanded statewide in 2012, the Global Talent Retention Initiative works with international students attending more than 20 Michigan schools. The program helps the students sell themselves to employers, helps connect employers to students, and helps demystify the challenges of hiring foreigners

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Program director Athena Trentin said immigration law should be changed to catch up with countries like Canada, Australia and Germany where the rules are designed to attract top talent. Trentin said the U.S. debate has been so stuck on the issue of undocumented workers that people are unable to see that the nation's policies are hurting the economy.

"We need to take a look at what is most economically beneficial to us or we're going to lose all of this talent we're educating and send it off to other countries," she said.

The changes would also help MSU recruit and retain "the best and brightest" to teach MSU students, according to school officials.

It's unclear whether Congress will pass an immigration bill, despite an unprecedented coalition of high-tech companies and other businesses, labor unions, universities, religious leaders, civil rights groups and others pushing for it.

Along with provisions that both Democrats and Republicans agree on — such as tighter border security and employee verification requirements — the Senate bill also includes a path to citizenship for many of the estimated 11 million people who entered the United States illegally or overstayed their visas. Conservative activists have said that amounts to amnesty and have warned Republicans not to support it.

The Senate bill would increase the number of visas for high-skilled workers, as well as make it easier for foreign students to get visas to study in the United States. The bill also would make it easier for them to stay in the United States once they've received a graduate degree in a STEM field.

That's important, said Barmak Nassirian, director of federal policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, if the United States wants to compete with western European countries to attract top talent.

"The challenge is, if you want the next Einstein, he may have been born in Switzerland. The person who is going to cure AIDS may not have been born here," Nassirian said. "And if that individual, on the strength of their academic merit and accomplishments, has an option of going to the Netherlands, or the U.K. or Germany or the United States, shouldn't we want him or her to come here?"

Hal Salzman, a professor of planning and public policy at Rutgers University, argues that it's less important to try to "win the lottery" by finding the next Einstein and more important that innovation continues from which all countries can benefit.

"Wouldn't you rather have two dozen cancer research centers around the world picking up different contexts, different perspectives and getting a cure for cancer?" he said. "Do I care if it's in the U.S.? It'd be great if it is. Does it really matter? No. What really matters is curing cancer."

Burnham said foreign graduate students at MSU are not taking slots away from U.S. students, who either don't have the technical skills for advanced STEM degrees or are able to have lucrative careers



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“We’re not displacing U.S. students,” Burnham said. “In fact, we’re desperate for more.”

Michigan State has the ninth-largest foreign student population among U.S. schools — more than 6,200, according to the Institute of International Education.

“Allowing them a better chance (to stay) through a realistic and rational plan would not only promote their own integration into our community and engagement as students,” MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon wrote in an opinion piece, “but also would benefit Michigan’s economy, improving the state’s ability to retain its own homegrown talent.”

But in a paper written for the union-backed Economic Policy Institute, Salzman and his co-authors say that for every two students that U.S. colleges graduate with STEM degrees, only one is hired into a STEM job.

If Congress increases the flow of highly educated foreigners into the U.S. workforce, Salzman says, that will flood the market with people from low-wage countries who will not have the same wage or career demands as U.S. citizens.

But researchers at the Brookings Institution reached the opposite conclusion. They say there is a shortage of workers in STEM occupations, demonstrated by the fact that those jobs take longer to fill than other jobs. In addition, according to the piece written by Jonathan Rothwell and Neil G. Ruiz, high-skilled visa holders are paid more than comparable native-born workers, suggesting that they’re providing hard-to-find skills.

Nassirian, of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, said it doesn’t make sense to oppose allowing in more highly-skilled foreigners even if some U.S. engineers can’t find jobs.

“The point is not to reach the point of absolute zero unemployment before we bring people in. The point is to continually advance the state of the field, be it engineering, computer science or physics,” Nassirian said.

“We want to attract the most capable people possible because the assumption is that the more topnotch talent you bring here, the larger the economic pie becomes as a consequence of what they end up doing here,” he said. “So people tend to see the one foreign born scientist replacing him or her, but they don’t see the jobs that the new activity creates for lots and lots of people.”

At a glance

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Advanced engineering degrees awarded to foreign national students at Michigan universities, 2009-2010:

- Wayne State University: 264 out of 441 master’s degrees (60 percent) and 19 out of 29 Ph.D.s (66 percent).
- Michigan State University: 24 out of 67 master’s degrees (36

percent) and 46 out of 73 Ph.D.s (63 percent).

- Western Michigan University: 16 out of 30 master's degrees (53 percent) and 5 out of 8 Ph.D.s (63 percent).

- University of Detroit Mercy: 21 out of 34 master's degrees (62 percent).

- University of Michigan-Ann Arbor: 374 out of 809 master's degrees (46 percent) and 116 out of 220 Ph.D.s (53 percent).

- Lawrence Technological University: 54 out of 135 master's degrees (40 percent).

- Oakland University: 33 out of 124 master's degrees (27 percent) and 3 out of 8 Ph.D.s (38 percent).

- Michigan Tech University: 70 out of 127 master's degrees (55 percent) and 8 out of 27 Ph.D.s (30 percent).

- University of Michigan-Dearborn: 43 out of 171 master's degrees (25 percent).

- Kettering University: 3 out of 19 master's degrees. (16 percent).

- Grand Valley State University: 1 out of 12 master's degrees (8 percent).

Foreign students at Michigan universities

Michigan Institutions with the highest number of foreign students:

6,382

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

6,209

Michigan State

University

2,216

Wayne State University

1,487

Western Michigan

University

1,152

Michigan Technological University

»

Leading countries of origin for foreign students in Michigan:

China: 31 percent

India: 13 percent

South Korea:

10 percent

Canada: 7.5 percent

Saudi Arabia: 5 percent

Source: *Compete America*, a coalition of businesses and universities promoting high-skilled immigration. Source: *Institute of International Education*

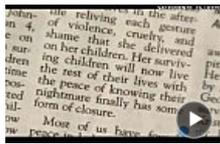
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