International Talent: Essential to America's Innovation Economy and National Security

The Association of American Universities (AAU) urges Congress to reject policies that make it harder for the United States to attract and retain the best and brightest students and scholars from around the world and other high-skilled, foreign-born talent.

International talent is vital to the STEM pipeline

America's leading research universities are magnets for global talent in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, which drive economic growth through research and development (R&D), new companies and industries, and tens of millions of high-wage jobs. International students are vital contributors to the STEM talent pipeline and research enterprise.

- 57% of all international students – undergraduates and graduates – pursue STEM degrees, with one in four studying math and computer science.
- Nearly half of graduates in STEM master's and doctoral programs in the United States are international students, and most remain here after graduation.
- A one-third reduction in international STEM graduates would cost our nation at least $200 billion in lost economic productivity per year after 10 years.
- International students directly contributed $43 billion to the economy during the 2024-25 academic year.
- China already graduates more STEM PhDs and undergraduates than the United States.
- Policies that deter international talent will put the United States further behind.

International talent fuels entrepreneurship and innovation

Because of their active role in creating new businesses, immigrants are more likely to create jobs than take jobs from native-born workers.

- Immigrants founded more than half of unicorn startups – privately held companies valued at $1 billion or more.
  - Notable examples include SpaceX, CrowdStrike, Zoom, and Instacart.
  - Nearly one-quarter of unicorn startups had a founder who came to the United States as an international student.
  - More than three-quarters of immigrant entrepreneurs backed by venture capital arrived in the United States as international students, underscoring the role of universities in incubating new firms.

- International talent is leading the AI revolution.
  - 60% of top AI firms - including Open AI, Databricks, Perplexity, World Labs, and Writer - have at least one immigrant founder.
  - 70% of immigrant founders of the most promising AI firms came to the United States on a student visa.
  - 70% of full-time graduate students in AI-related fields are international students.
  - China produces a large share of the world's top AI talent, yet most pursue graduate school and careers at American universities and companies.

- Immigrants advance America's leadership in critical emerging technology sectors.
  - About half of graduates in quantum-related fields are foreign born.
  - About 40% of high-skilled semiconductor workers were born abroad and universities are their main entry point into the U.S. workforce.
  - The biotech industry currently faces shortages of scientists and skilled technicians; international graduates are a vital resource to fill these positions.

International talent keeps America secure

Foreign-born STEM master's and doctoral degree holders will continue to be a major source of workforce talent for defense-related industries including aerospace, electronics component manufacturing, architecture, engineering, and defense R&D.

- More than 80% of companies in the defense industrial base (DIB) report difficulties in finding qualified STEM workers and specialists.
- Defense-related industries rely heavily on STEM workers with advanced degrees, and half of these workers are foreign born.
- In 2020, roughly 113,000 foreign-born college graduates were working on Department of Defense-funded projects; approximately 85% were naturalized citizens.

The United States is losing the international talent race

As the administration takes steps to deter international students and scholars from enrolling or completing their degrees at U.S. universities, other nations are capitalizing on our losses and luring away talent.

- Canada is budgeting $1.2 billion to lure foreign scientists and graduate students and plans to launch an "accelerated immigration pathway" for H-1B visa holders.
- The European Commission has announced a $565 million investment to make Europe a magnet for researchers over the next two years.
- In October, China launched a "K visa" specifically for international science and technology graduates to relocate to China to study or work.
- India launched the Visiting Advanced Joint Research Faculty (VAJRA) program in 2017 to entice Indian-origin scientists back to the country's universities and research institutions.

We ask Congress to oppose all policies that limit the ability of international students and scholars to enroll and complete their degrees at U.S. universities and gain work experience at American companies, including:

- Ending duration of status for student visa holders.
- Delaying student visa interviews and denying or revoking student visas based on minor infractions.
- Enacting a full or partial travel ban on nationals from 39 countries and individuals with Palestinian Authority travel documents.
- Considering restrictions to the Optional Practical Training program for student visa holders.
- Implementing a $100,000 fee for international researchers, faculty, doctors, and other specialists seeking to enter the United States on an H-1B visa.
- Changing the H-1B lottery in ways that will disproportionately penalize early career scientists.