

Commentary/Op-Ed - March 2011

Council on Foreign Relations Publishes CUF Commentary on Immigration Reform

The Council on Foreign Relations published a commentary by the Center's Jonathan Bowles about how immigration reform could boost U.S. economic performance. Published as part of an expert roundup on immigration reform, our piece argues that immigration reform will give the U.S. the ability to retain its advantages in human capital, innovation and entrepreneurship and boost the fortunes of many regions.

by Jonathan Bowles

Immigration Reform and U.S. Economic Performance

It's not surprising that hard-luck cities from Cleveland to Detroit are actively pursuing strategies to attract immigrants today. Immigrants are proven economic turnaround specialists and catalysts for growth. In community after community, they have replenished lost population, given local employers a capable workforce, and, perhaps most importantly, provided a critical entrepreneurial spark.

At a time when innovation and entrepreneurship is more crucial than ever to the nation's recovery and future growth, immigrants are increasingly providing what's needed. The foreign born are starting a disproportionate share of new firms--from tiny retail shops in neighborhoods once marked by empty storefronts to fast-growing tech firms in Silicon Valley and Cambridge. A recent study noted that share of entrepreneurs who are immigrants rose from 13 percent in 1996 to almost 30 percent in 2010.

Immigrants also comprise a significant share of the nation's engineers and scientists, something that can't be overlooked in a global economy where regions and nations with the best human capital have the competitive edge. While the United States surely needs to do a better job preparing its native-born workforce, the expected retirement of large numbers of baby boomers in every industry makes it essential that the country continues to attract and retain high-skilled immigrants.

Passing comprehensive immigration reform will give the United States the ability to retain its advantages in human capital, innovation, and entrepreneurship, and boost the fortunes of many regions. Without it, the United States risks taking a huge step backward at the precise moment when global competition is intensifying.



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