

Foreign inventors dominate patents awarded to top research universities

The Business Review by Kent Hoover, Washington Bureau Chief

Date: Wednesday, June 27, 2012, 7:10am EDT



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More than 76 percent of the patents awarded to the nation's top 10 research universities last year had a foreign-born scientist listed as an inventor.

That's according to the Partnership for a New American Economy, which analyzed 1,500 patents awarded in 2011 to the top 10 patent-producing universities in the U.S. The organization, which is composed of mayors and business leaders, contends this finding demonstrates the need to reform our immigration policies to allow more of these foreign-born inventors to remain in the United States.

Many of these inventors may end up leaving the country under current policies. The study found that 54 percent of the patents studied included foreign-born inventors who were students, post-doctoral researchers or staff researchers who were not professors. These foreign researchers are the "most likely to face major hurdles obtaining the visas needed to settle permanently in the United States," according to the partnership.

University research is important because it helps the U.S. stay ahead in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Universities receive one in six of all patents for molecular biology and microbiology, for example. Academic research institutions own more than one-third of patents in genetics.

The partnership contends Congress should help the U.S. keep its research edge by passing legislation to:

- Grant permanent residency -- green cards -- to foreign students who earn graduate degrees in STEM fields;
- Create a Startup Visa for foreign-born entrepreneurs who want to start companies in the U.S.; and
- Remove or at least raise the current cap of 65,000 H-1B visas, which are awarded to highly skilled foreigners who work in the U.S.

These recommendations were seconded in a letter sent to the White House and Congress today by more than 80 university presidents.

"If U.S. political leaders don't reform the country's broken immigration system soon, they risk jeopardizing one of the country's biggest assets -- our ability to leverage our pre-eminent universities to attract talented foreigners and make them part of the great American success story," the partnership's report concludes.