

Immigrant skills

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The immigration debate is about more than just controlling illegal immigration. It's also about being much smarter and more creative in deciding who will be allowed to come into this country legally.

Congress is considering putting less emphasis on family reunification and more emphasis on a point system that would reward immigrants' skills and education. So far, so good. This isn't anti-family, as some on the left claim. It's common sense. There's nothing wrong with giving a preference to the spouse or children of a U.S. citizen or legal resident. But that principle need not extend as it has for decades to every adult relative in the family. Besides, generally speaking, we like the idea of an immigration system that looks favorably upon the educated and skilled, especially if we're talking about individuals who are already here working or attending U.S. universities on temporary visas. Why should they be forced to go home when we've made a substantial investment in them?

Having said that, the real question is where we go from there. If the only criteria considered are education and skills, and we do not take into account the specific needs of the market, you could easily wind up with a system that puts supply above demand. That's backward. You'd have a government bureaucracy that lets in scores of engineers, doctors and PhDs regardless of whether there are jobs available in those fields. That's a recipe for one thing: a legion of very well-educated taxi drivers and short-order cooks.

Employers should make these decisions by sponsoring the individuals they want to hire. Employers even have a tool at their disposal: The H-1B visa program, which is designed to import high-skilled workers. It should be expanded.

So let's fix the problems with the current system, absolutely. But let's not create another problem in its place. Leave the discretion where it belongs - with employers, and not with government.

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