Immigration Reform Day of Action
President Eli Capilouto
April 19, 2013

Last year, I had the opportunity to travel to China with a delegation from the University of Kentucky to advance several partnerships growing between UK's colleges and departments and universities and industries in a country growing in economic importance.

One such partnership is between UK's Center for Applied Energy Research and the world's largest power company. During a meeting with industry representatives, we shared our exciting work in the development of clean coal technology and discussed partnerships, the exchange of students, and faculty collaboration as part of the US-China Clean Energy Research Center.

As we met, they described several multi-billion dollar research and development investments in their country’s energy sector. In comparison, the proposed Department of Energy’s FY2014 budget for fossil energy R&D was just over $420 million, reflecting an approximate reduction of $82 million over last year.

That stark reality underscores the competitive environment our country's students face today and in the coming years as our economy continues to be transformed by global forces.

We can't avoid it, nor should we try.

The changing landscape, in fact, demands more of the United States in educating and preparing a well-educated work force -- one outfitted with the skills necessary to compete and succeed in a global, multinational, multifaceted economy.

We can no longer afford to focus only locally, we must broaden our scope. But we can make changes here at home that will help ensure our competitiveness, particularly in science and technology where advances are occurring rapidly in ways that are shaping our economy in profound ways.

Last month, I joined the presidents of Cornell University, Arizona State University, and Miami-Dade College in a letter calling on colleges and universities across the country to voice support for a sensible solution for the United States' broken immigration policy.

On April 19th, some 75 institutions nationwide joined together on National Immigration Reform Day and we have been at the juncture of this important national dialogue. Universities are responsible for educating the workforce that creates jobs and fills employment ranks; and our graduate students, faculty and staff reach transformative breakthroughs, write patents and invent new technologies that fuel our economy.

In many ways, the existing, outmoded immigration policies – written nearly a half-century ago – are hindering us in each of these endeavors.

Consider that a quarter of the Americans who have won a Nobel Prize have been immigrants, and – in 2011 – more than three quarters of the patents received by the top-10 US patent-producing universities listed an immigrant inventor. Their innovations yield impressive economic growth for the United States; between 1990 and 2000 these discoveries have contributed to growing U.S. GDP by 2.4 percent, as analyzed by the Bureau of Economic Research.
In an economic context, according to data from the Partnership for a New American Economy’s National Immigration Forum, 40 percent of all Fortune 500 companies were founded by an immigrant or the child of an immigrant.

While on our campus, international students bring a cultural richness to the university community; adding global perspectives to classroom discussions and conversations in our residence halls before they graduate. At the same time, international students and families had a net impact on the U.S. and Kentucky economies of some $21 billion and $137 million, respectively, in 2011-12, according to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors.

The data tell a compelling story – one that parallels with an American Dream that inspired generations of immigrant entrepreneurs who traveled to the United States in pursuit of a better life.

Yet, in an increasingly interdependent world – we are making it difficult for immigrants to chart a promising path through education and, ultimately, employment in the United States.

Our workforce needs, especially in STEM education, are growing, and at the current rate of production, we will fall short of the necessary targets to accelerate and sustain economic growth. Roughly half of post-baccalaureate degrees awarded in STEM disciplines are to foreign-born students, but we lack the common-sense immigration policies to keep these graduates in the United States.

In short, we are preparing the brightest minds to lead the new global economy and then watch as they return to another country hungry for their entrepreneurial spirit – we’re competing against the students we educate.

As a nation of immigrants, we have an opportunity to seize our heritage and find an alternative method for engaging a vibrant part of our global community in our future. By choosing a path to sensible immigration reform, not only can we help Kentucky become more competitive nationally, but we can contribute to the overall global prosperity of the United States.

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