

**The Patriot-News (Harrisburg, PA)**  
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**Editorial**

**“Don’t Let Immigration Debate Block Needed Skilled Workers.”**

Lost amid the illegal immigration debate is a major problem in the visa program for foreign workers who are badly needed in the U.S. technology sector.

As a result, many potential workers can't gain entry and others are forced to leave the United States, creating national competition for the dwindling pool of these specialized employees that ends up squeezing midstate companies.

While we prefer to see immigration issues addressed under a comprehensive bill, specific legislation targeting H1-B visas, or "green cards," may be among the exceptions.

Melvyn Schiavelli, president of the Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, says this country simply isn't producing enough skilled graduates to meet the demands of high-tech companies.

He is among those locally and nationally pushing for more of these graduates from American universities -- it was a main reason behind Harrisburg University's founding six years ago -- but until then he says it's crucial for U.S. tech companies to have access to the foreign talent pool.

The problem with H1-B visas is twofold. They are limited to 140,000 each year and the backlog for those that do exist is so deep it leaves many potential workers in limbo for years.

Foreigners completing graduate programs from American universities are unable to gain jobs, or have spouses join them to do likewise, until they can get the visa for permanent working status. Many simply leave, rather than wait out the process.

Like some opponents of guest worker provisions for illegal immigrants, critics of H1-B visa reform contend that foreign tech workers will take jobs from native-born Americans. But supporters note that these visas represent less than 1 percent of the U.S. workforce and that many of the foreign workers being sought have highly specialized skills and education.

Kelly Lewis, president and CEO of the Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania, said the midstate is currently short 500 to 1,000 tech professionals. Not only does the visa issue contribute to that dearth of workers, Lewis says it puts the region at a competitive disadvantage in trying to attract and retain those employees.

Reform of the visa system was part of a comprehensive immigration bill that failed to pass Congress last summer despite widespread bipartisan support and the backing of President Bush.

It's unlikely such legislation will be revisited until after the 2008 presidential and congressional elections. Even then, the split on this hot-button issue among the electorate makes it doubtful any clear consensus will be reached.

Congress needs to start picking off a few less contentious issues pertaining to immigration, and the H1-B visa for legal workers might be a good place to begin.