

Have skills, will travel

POLITICS: But will Congress allow more educated migrants into the country? | *Timothy Lamer*

You probably didn't see many H-1B visa holders among the thousands of immigrant protesters who flooded the streets of U.S. cities this month. They were more likely to be in libraries hitting the books or in laboratories doing research.

But that doesn't make their presence in the United States any less controversial. H-1B is the designation the government gives to highly skilled temporary migrants (such as scientists, information technology specialists, and engineers) who come to the United States to work, and part of the immigration debate in Washington concerns how many to allow into the country and what their effect is on the economy.

Current law lets 65,000 H-1B workers, usually from China or India, into the United States per year. The Senate Judiciary Committee endorsed a plan to increase that to 115,000, but so far the House has opposed any expansion. President Bush has called on Congress to "be realistic and reasonable and raise that cap."

Few doubt that the H-1B program is good for American companies—many of which are lobbying vigorously for an expansion—and for the American consumers who buy their products. The concern opponents have is the effect on skilled American workers who have to compete with the visa holders for jobs.

David Huber, who calls himself "an American citizen and an engineer whose life has been devastated by that program," gave moving testimony against H-1B visas on March 30 to a House subcommittee on immigration. He said that despite strong credentials he lost two jobs to foreigners who were willing to work for much less than he had earned. "Between the summer of 2002 and January 2006, I had only worked for a total of about 6.5 months," Mr. Huber said. "I fully depleted my savings, and was nearly homeless on two or three occasions."

Mr. Huber's case may be an isolated one; whether and how much the program hurts other Americans depends on whom you ask. Harvard economist George Borjas found that when foreign workers increase the doctorate supply by 10 percent, they lower wages of Americans with doctorates by 3 percent to 4 percent. A Federal Reserve study in 2003, however, concluded that the H-1B program did not depress wages for information technology workers, though it did find that the program may add to the short-term unemployment rate. Allegations of fraud have also plagued the program.

Still, marquee companies like Apple, Cisco, IBM, and Hewlett Packard insist that they need educated foreign workers to be competitive. The implication is uncomfortable but

difficult to deny: American colleges and universities are not exactly churning out large numbers of scientists and engineers. InformationWeek reports that only about 5 percent of U.S. undergraduate students pursue degrees in science or engineering, and the National Science Foundation says about one-third of the Ph.D.s awarded in those fields go to foreign students.

American companies say this leaves them in a bind, with some positions simply being left unfilled because of a lack of qualified applicants. "I have many executives saying they would love to hire for those positions from here," Chris Merida of the American Engineering Association told the San Jose Mercury News. "But . . . the talent is not here."

Others question the wisdom of not utilizing the skills of more foreign students trained at American universities. "Do we want to educate those students and send them out of the country to compete against U.S. firms?" asked Stuart Anderson, executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy. "Wouldn't it be better to assimilate this talent and allow them to create jobs and innovations here in America?"

The H-1B program will be one of many facets of immigration reform that Congress must deal with when its spring recess ends on April 24. Tech companies say they'll be watching, and that without more H-1B visas, they may have no choice but to outsource skilled jobs overseas.

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