

The immigrant factor Our view • Once more with feeling: St. Louis must open its arms.

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Body

On Tuesday, economic development officials from St. Louis and St. Louis County revealed a study that said (a) immigration is good for a city's business climate and (b) the St. Louis region has 80 percent fewer foreign-born residents than other large metro areas, which is a big reason why the area's economy is lagging.

Had they unveiled the wheel, we could not have been less surprised.

This is not to denigrate St. Louis University economist Jack Strauss' 48-page study (plus footnotes, references and demographic maps) of the economic impact of immigration on the region. It is a persuasive piece of scholarship that quantifies the benefits of welcoming foreign-born talent:

- Had St. Louis attracted immigrants in the past decade as fast as other large metro areas, income growth here would have been 4 percent to 7 percent higher, total income would have been 7 percent to 11 percent higher and job growth would have increased by 4 percent to 5 percent.
- Encouraging immigration, by spawning economic growth, would lower the unemployment rate among black and white workers by 2 percent.
- Immigrants are 60 percent more likely to start a business than the average St. Louisan. They are 44 percent more likely to have a college degree.
- Average household income among immigrant families is \$83,000 a year.

Many other metro areas, as Mr. Strauss noted, are well aware of the immigrant factor. They have developed "economic and social policies that embrace, rather than drive away, this vital workforce," he said.

The policies are not rocket science (though if Boeing needed a rocket scientist, plenty of immigrants would qualify). Other cities do things as simple as create central information clearinghouses, a welcoming network and business-government partnerships to encourage immigrant-friendly policies.

St. Louis has the excellent but underfunded International Institute on South Grand Boulevard, which reaches out to refugees and low-income immigrants. High-tech firms and universities can recruit scientists and physicians. But business and civic outreach programs for mid-range professionals are in short supply.

"This initiative is less about dollars than a change in mind-set of our local business leaders and public," Mr. Strauss wrote. "The region needs to view immigration as an opportunity, not a threat - a chance to hire the best."

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One important step that the **St. Louis** business community should take right away: Sit down with the Republican leaders of the Missouri Legislature and tell them to stop their members from **immigrant**-bashing. Threaten their campaign funds.

What sort of message is the "business-friendly" Legislature sending when the House passes legislation mandating that drivers license exams **must** be offered only in English? Or when a state Senate committee endorses a bill mirroring provisions of Alabama's and Arizona's "show me your papers" laws?

What would ambitious and entrepreneurial **immigrants** think of the immortal words uttered in 2011 by state Rep. John Cauthorn, a Republican from (of all the towns in Missouri) Mexico: "The average guy on the **streets** hates Spanish, and it is everywhere. To the average guy, that is important. We're almost to the point of losing our identity as a nation."

Xenophobia strikes deep. Narrow minds confronted with facts often close. But, as Mr. Strauss' study emphasizes, **immigrants** don't take away jobs, they create them. It is how **St. Louis** grew, and it is how **St. Louis** can grow again.

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