

Bond, Durbin focus on skilled immigrants

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Body

Bond says

The United States should try to keep highly **skilled** foreign graduates here and make it easier for American companies to hire them.

Durbin says

Bond's position is sound, but health care workers from poor nations also should be encouraged to spend time back home.

The contentious immigration debate unfolding in the Senate this week has **focused** on the estimated 11 million illegal **immigrants** in the United States, many of whom work in low-wage, hard-to-fill jobs.

But Sens. Christopher "Kit" **Bond** and Dick **Durbin** are also looking at a different kind of **immigrant**: the highly educated professional who comes to the United States legally to study and then stays, often snagging a well-paying job in a premier field such as health care, biotechnology or engineering.

The St. Louis region attracts hundreds of such foreign students every year.

They include men like Rommel Villagomez, who came from Ecuador nearly 10 years ago to study geophysics at St. Louis University and now works at Edward Jones as a software programmer. After almost a decade of living in legal limbo on a series of temporary visas, he and his wife got their green cards a month ago and no longer have to worry about whether they must sell their house in St. Louis County and move back to Ecuador.

"The worst is just waiting, and you don't know if at the end they're going to deny you," he said.

Bond, R-Mo., sees **immigrants** like Villagomez as a boon to the economy, giving the United States a much-needed competitive advantage in burgeoning fields to which American students aren't often attracted. After American institutions have invested in these students, **Bond** argues, it makes sense to try to keep them here and make it easier for U.S. firms to hire them.

"We educate in our system some really outstanding scientists, engineers, mathematicians and technology experts. And when they finish their education, we say 'Sorry, you've got to get out,'" **Bond** said. "In this increasingly technosensitive, techno-centric economy, the jobs we want are the jobs that are created by people with a science background."

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Bond is supporting provisions in the immigration bill that would give foreign students who finish advanced degrees in math, science, technology or engineering more time to find a job with an American company before their visas expire. He is also offering his own amendment that would broaden the pool of students eligible for extra time to include those earning master's and post-doctoral degrees.

Durbin, D-Ill., supports **Bond's** efforts, but he also worries about the devastating impact on the home countries losing talent. He said that over the last 10 years, about 900,000 health care workers, scientists, engineers and similar professionals have immigrated to the United States. "We are the largest magnet for this level of talent in the world," he said.

On a trip to Africa last year, **Durbin** visited a tiny hospital in eastern Congo. That nation has one doctor for every 165,000 residents and one surgeon for every 3 million.

Durbin acknowledged that the U.S. faces its own shortage of health care workers, especially in poor rural areas like Southern Illinois, where foreign-born doctors are often the only ones willing to work. But he said the poorest nations can ill afford a "brain drain" at a time when they are dealing with an AIDS epidemic and other health care crises.

"We're poaching," **Durbin** said in a meeting with Post-Dispatch reporters this year. "Our perverse incentives take away from some of the poorest places on Earth a talent pool that they need to deal with reality."

On the Senate floor, **Durbin** noted that Chicago has more Ethiopian-trained doctors than Ethiopia does. "What's the fair thing to do here?" he asked.

He plans to offer an amendment that would encourage foreign students in the health care field to return to their home countries to fulfill any pledges they have made to work there in exchange for help financing their education. It would also allow doctors and nurses who have immigrated to the United States to go back home to work for a few years without jeopardizing their U.S. legal status.

Filling a need

Bond's and **Durbin's** amendments both hint at the same underlying trend: The American economy is not just turning to foreign workers to fill low-wage jobs, but also to fuel its most prestigious and burgeoning industries.

Experts say that not enough American students are attracted to career paths in science, engineering, technology and math -- where **Bond's** amendment is targeted.

Bond's office said that last year, China graduated more than 600,000 new engineers. India produced 350,000, while the United States saw 70,000 finish engineering degrees. American university classrooms and corporate boardrooms need foreign students to remain competitive, **Bond** and others argue.

"We're in a more competitive world today . . . and it's very important that we turn our attention to sustaining the United States as the most attractive place for advanced study, in science and engineering especially," said Mark Wrighton, chancellor of Washington University, which has about 1,300 international students.

The Senate bill would give foreign science, technology, math and engineering students a year to find a job in their field in the United States after they have completed their studies. If they find a job, the bill would make it easier for them to earn permanent legal status.

When it comes to the problem **Durbin** is highlighting -- a shortage of doctors and nurses -- U.S. lawmakers have similarly welcomed the influx of foreign-born doctors, particularly in rural areas where Americans are scarce.

"We need doctors in the United States, that's for sure," **Durbin** said, adding that his amendment offers a "modest" change that would bring some balance to a difficult dilemma.

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Durbin said the real solution to the shortage of top-tier American professionals, whether scientists, doctors, or others, requires a bigger solution: a major increase in education funding to better prepare U.S. students for careers in those fields.

"If we're going to be serious about being competitive in the 21st century, we must be serious about education," he said.

The fate of the underlying Senate bill remained unclear Wednesday, as lawmakers continued to wrangle over the question of how to treat the millions of undocumented workers currently in the United States. Democrats blocked GOP efforts to make it harder for some of those here illegally to earn citizenship.

STLtoday.com/talkoftheday Are we welcoming enough to legal **immigrants**? Join the discussion online in the Talk of the Day blog.

Graphic

PHOTO

PHOTO - (Christopher "Kit" **Bond**) PHOTO - (Dick **Durbin**) PHOTO - Rommel Villagomez and his wife, Soledad, go over the math homework of their 6-year-old daughter, Samantha, on Wednesday in their Creve Coeur home. Rommel Villagomez, who came from Ecuador nearly 10 years ago to study geophysics at St. Louis University, is a software programmer at Edward Jones. Amanda Whitlock | Post-Dispatch

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